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From the author's Parents
Xmas 1885



Oliver Madox-Brown

THE DWALE BLUTH

HEBDITCH'S LEGACY

AND OTHER LITERARY REMAINS

OF

OLIVER MADOX-BROWN

AUTHOR OF "GABRIEL DENVER"

EDITED BY

WILLIAM M. ROSSETTI AND F. HUEFFER

WITH A MEMOIR AND TWO PORTRAITS.

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MEMOIR.

THE memoir of a youth who had not completed his twentieth year,—who had been favourably circumstanced and lovingly nurtured,—who had never so much as left for many weeks together the shelter of the paternal roof,—who was studiously inclined, to the extent of wholly disregarding other interests and enjoyments,—who, in fact, never encountered misfortune until the one dire misfortune of his untimely end,—such a memoir cannot be expected to contain incidents of exciting interest. A simple outline of what he did, worthy of keeping his name in remembrance, may seem the most rational form of memorial.

With both his parents and two sisters surviving; and having the sense of their loss green and fresh to nourish their recollections, it is natural that facts of

his earliest years (magnified to their eyes, as might by others be supposed, through the lens of his subsequent attainments) should be forthcoming ; instances of childish precocity, which the later and less questionable precocity of his after years as painter and author would bring out into clearer form and consistency from the dim regions of fading impressions. Thus they aver that, at the age of nine months, his very first attempt at utterance was the word "beautiful" (pronounced by the infantine mouth "bookiyou"), when pictures, or other objects worthy of admiration, were shown to him. They tell how, at the age of two years, he was found by his eldest sister alone in the nursery, weeping and lamenting the loss of his baby-brother (the two now rest together in one grave), and crying, "Arthur ! Arthur ! shall I never see you again ?" or baby words to that effect. How, somewhat later, he suddenly one evening gravely changed the prayer for "daily bread" into one for "sugar." How, at the age of four, he greatly astonished a friend of the family by giving him a sound and circumstantial description of one of the landscapes painted by his own father, that of "Walton-on-the-Naze" ; as much to the auditor's surprise "as if," to use his words, "the cat had taken to speaking." How, still in his fifth year, he would cover the white marble mantel-shelves, and any other available spaces, with designs

of hunts, battles, or subjects of that sort. These with other the like anecdotes are vouched for, though possibly bearing to the ordinary reader a stamp as of family legend or time-inflated impressions. As the childish years advance, the stories may obtain readier credence. How, at the age of five or six, he would, while stubbornly resisting to learn reading, yet set himself most sedulously to acquire any other knowledge that apparently did not concern him, but especially facts relating to natural history. How he would squeeze knowledge out of any one, not omitting the local policeman, who once confided to the child the secret of where he kept a stick in the hedge, for company on dark nights in the lanes around Highgate.

But of such scattered child-stories, enough; it is time to proceed to our less desultory outline of the facts.

Oliver Madox Brown, son of the historical painter Ford Madox Brown, was born at Finchley on the 20th of January 1855. At the age of eight years he executed, under his father's tuition, his first picture—a small still-life piece, in water-colour, of a book and an apple; showing, of course, more what his father's plan of instruction was than any individual capacity of his own at that early age. Not long afterwards he

entered the junior classes of University College, London. He only continued there, however, about two years; and, as he was distinguished chiefly for idleness among his schoolfellows, his father decided to take him away and have him instructed at home, where, at the same time, he could best work out the pictorial instincts which at this period seemed to monopolize him. The late Rev. Mr. Case, the kind and philosophic head master of the junior boys, alone showed the discrimination to foretell a remarkable future for the eccentric, thoughtless, but quick-witted child.

After he had left the college, his first work, at the age of twelve, was a small water-colour of *Margaret of Anjou and the Robber*, a subject set him by his father as a task. This little work, which was executed almost entirely without nature, but with great pains and study, exhibits choice colour and dramatic vitality in the heads, which, when examined minutely—for they are not half the size of a thumb-nail—are really surprising, compacted as they are of childish naïveté and vivid characterization; the young prince's head is indeed as unexceptionable as anything the painter might afterwards have achieved. This water-colour is now in the possession of Mr. Dante Rossetti. After this, at the age of fourteen, the boy undertook a water-colour of *The Centaur Chiron receiving the Infant*

Jason from the Slave, the subject being this time of his own choosing. This work was one of no small labour, being all most scrupulously studied from nature ; it was exhibited in 1869 in the Dudley Gallery, and one may well doubt whether—even leaving out of account the question of comparative merits—any other so juvenile painter ever offered, or obtained admission for, a work in that exhibition. Here also in the next season, 1870, his water-colour entitled *Obstinacy* was well hung and attracted considerable attention. This represents a horse being urged by its rider into the sea ; if, on the one hand, it evinces little of that masterly facility which is so much the appanage of the modern English animal-painter, it displays, on the other, qualities of design and action by no means common in our exhibitions. Both these works were purchased by Mr. King of Liverpool. To the Royal Academy, during the same season, he contributed—and it was well placed on the line—a water-colour of somewhat similar kind; named *Exercise*. A groom is here represented galloping an Arab horse round and round in the firm sand of the sea-shore,—“ taking the spirit out of him ” to the music of the tumbling breakers. Oliver’s next performance, 1871, was hung at the International Exhibition, South Kensington, and was more ambitious in aim. He chose an excellent subject from *The Tempest*, probably

never treated before, *Prospero and the Infant Miranda* sent adrift in an open boat by the hired traitors of his brother, the usurping Duke of Milan. The incident is thus narrated by Prospero (Act 1, scene 2):—

PROSPERO.

In few, they hurried us aboard a bark,
 Bore us some leagues to sea ; where they prepared
 A rotten carcass of a boat, not rigged,
 Nor tackle, sail, nor mast; the very rats
 Instinctively had quit it. There they hoist us,
 To cry to the sea that roared to us, to sigh
 To the winds whose pity, sighing back again,
 Did us but loving wrong.

MIRANDA.

Alack ! what trouble
 Was I then to you !

PROSPERO.

Oh ! a cherubin
 Thou wast that did preserve me ! Thou didst smile,
 Infused with a fortitude from heaven,
 When I have decked the sea with drops full salt,
 Under my burden groaned ; which raised in me
 An undergoing stomach, to bear up
 Against what should ensue.

MIRANDA.

How came we ashore ?

PROSPERO.

By Providence divine,
Some food we had, and some fresh water, that
A noble Neapolitan, Gonzalo,
Out of his charity, being then appointed
Master of this design, did give us, with
Rich garments, linens, stuffs, and necessaries,
Which since have steaded much. So, of his gentleness,
Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me,
From mine own library, with volumes that
I prize above my dukedom.

In the picture, a water-colour, the child is represented only half dressed; the expressions of infantine terror on her face, and of high kingly rage on that of Prospero, as he shakes a menacing hand at his betrayers, are given with great force and truth. This picture, purchased by Mr. Rowley of Manchester, was very handsomely, after the young painter's death, presented to his father by the owner. At an earlier date, towards 1869, Oliver had designed, for an edition of Byron, published by Messrs. Moxon and illustrated by his father, a *Mazeppa*, and a *Deformed Transformed*, both engraved in that volume. The former was afterwards painted in oils, and exhibited at the New British Institution in 1871; the latter subject was also begun in oils, but remains uncompleted. In 1871 likewise he painted a water-colour of the river Lynn, in Devonshire; a study of rock and torrent-stream and wooded

bank, singularly felicitous for colour and truthfulness, serving partly as material for the background of the painting from the *Deformed Transformed*. In 1872 was exhibited, at the Society of French Artists in Bond Street, the last of his pictures, the most careful and on the whole much the finest of them, a water-colour from *Silas Marner*. Old Silas, with the little girl Eppie tucked under his arm, and a lantern in his hand, is shown finding the body of Godfrey Cass's wife lying on the thickly snow-strewn ground. The small foot-marks and finger-marks, indicating where the infant had crawled away from her dead mother, are seen leading off to the firelit window and open door of the recluse's cottage. The mingled look of kindliness and miserly distrust on the features and short-sighted spectacled eyes of Silas, on which the lantern-light glares and flickers, have a strange half-weird impress of truth, contrasted with the distress on the foundling's face,—a distress chiefly selfish, as infantile sorrow must be. The posture of the mother is beautiful; and the whole aspect of the composition startling and mournful, but without being either cold in colour or repellent in sentiment. It may be added that this painting does not, in any one point, recall the style of the elder painter: that is to say, there is nothing of a kind imitative or reproductive either of the father's colour or of his style of drawing or handling; while at the same time

it is true—and not less fortunate than true—that those qualities of prompt, solid, and realistic invention, and of dramatic force and directness in story-telling, which are so markedly distinctive in the parent's pictorial work, reappeared as a genuine and personal inheritance in that of the son.

But a fresh impulse was about to send off the youthful artist on a different track. In the winter of 1871-72, when he was approaching or just turned of seventeen years of age, he wrote the story of *The Black Swan*; such was the original title of the tale, which is published in this volume in its first form. Following the advice of friends, and to meet the wishes of the publishers, he subsequently altered the title, and modified the plot; and in 1873 the work was brought out by Messrs. Smith and Elder, as *Gabriel Denver*. In especial, the ending of the story was changed, and, as we think, weakened. In the present edition of the young author's remains as a whole, it seems highly desirable that whatever he wrote should be given in its most marked and individual form; *The Black Swan* therefore appears (by the kind permission of Messrs. Smith and Elder) as he first conceived and completed it, with all its tragic force of conclusion. During the very great cold of the months of December and January, locked in his room without even a fire, he wrote this tale,—possibly, when viewed in all its relations, the

most remarkable prose story ever penned by a youth not older than from sixteen to seventeen. This we may say without forgetting even Victor Hugo's *Bug Jargal*, written at the age of fifteen or sixteen ; which, if slightly ahead of *The Black Swan* in respect of juvenile precocity, must be pronounced inferior to it as a sustained invention or piece of art. It may be added that Oliver Brown had at first thought out his narrative when fifteen years of age, and had at that time projected writing it in verse ; a scheme from which, independent and tenacious of his own personality in all things, he was diverted by reflecting that, among the authors belonging to, or highly prized in, his own social circle, there were various writers of poetry, but few or none who produced prose fiction.

The beginning of this tale of *The Black Swan*, consisting of eight or ten chapters, was the first intimation his family had received that they had a forthcoming romance-writer among them ; his father, as we hear, was three days before he could calmly realise the fact to himself. It is true that three years before, at the age of fourteen, Oliver had produced some sonnets, six or seven in number, which at that time had been scarcely less a surprise to the family, it never having, till then, been supposed that he so much as understood the meaning of the term “sonnet.”

These his first verses he had destroyed in a fit of morbid irritability or bashfulness caused by their being shown to a few friends. One alone has survived, owing to its having been written as the motto for one of the pictures of Mrs. Stillman (then Miss Spartali), and printed on the gilt of the frame; we are thus enabled to give it here.

SONNET.

Leaning against the window, rapt in thought,
Of what sweet past do thy soft brown eyes dream
That so expressionlessly sweet they seem?
Or what great image hath thy fancy wrought
To wonder round and gaze at? or doth aught
Of legend move thee, o'er which eyes oft stream,
Telling of some sweet saint who rose supreme
From martyrdom to God, with glory fraught?

Or art thou listening to the gondolier,
Whose song is dying o'er the water wide,
Trying the faintly-sounding tune to hear
Before it mixes with the rippling tide?
Or dost thou think of one that comes not near,
And whose false heart, in thine, thine own doth chide?

Having once set-to at romance-writing, the youth soon became thoroughly absorbed in the pursuit. It

is difficult for those who knew him best, and most lovingly appreciated him, to decide whether there was intrinsically more in him of the painter or of the author; that he had a genuine, fertile, and most unusual faculty in both ways cannot to them be doubtful for a moment. To painting he took by nature and by inducement; his father, being a painter, tutored him to make trial of his powers in that art. To writing he addressed himself without any prompting whatever, and indeed, it may be inferred, not without some restive idiosyncracy of his own, which urged him rather to follow a new path than to tread the paternal vestiges. The pen was taken up, certainly without any defined intention of abandoning the pencil. But soon the use of it engrossed him entirely; he came to regard writing as his regular, and almost his professional, form of self-expression; and it was only in his last illness that he reverted to the idea of pursuing, on the hoped-for but never to be realised recovery of health, painting as an ordinary and steady occupation, with authorship as a supplement,—a relief to be cherished equally by his liking and his ambition.

Before *Gabriel Denver* found a publisher, the romantic surroundings and scenery of Lynmouth in Devonshire, where he passed four or five weeks in 1871, had suggested to Oliver the story of *The*

Dwale Bluth, which phrase means in Devonshire speech, Craze-bloom or Frenzy-flower, indicating the deadly nightshade. It would be superfluous for us to enter upon any analysis of this tale, included as it is in the present collection. Unfinished though it remains, it will probably be regarded by readers as the chief work of the series. At the end of the story we have summarized in one short chapter the purposed conclusion of its plot, well remembered from conversations which we and others had with the author ; but, as the tale was laid aside chiefly for the purpose of waiting until fresh incidents might accrue, some of the characters as well as much of the scenery being studied from nature, we cannot vouch for the ultimate form it would have taken. It was finally shelved to make way for the London story entitled *Hebditch's Legacy*, on which the author was still engaged up to the time of his last illness. The final chapter of this story also we have made up from notes or remembrance of what the author had said. The many researches he made in connection with *The Dwale Bluth* gave rise to his writing the fragment named *The Yeth Hounds*, also a Devonshire legend. He was known to have begun other work,—*Dismal Jemmy*, a humorous story, and *To all Eternity*, a blank-verse poem. These, with the plot of an Irish story,* were found among

* Vide note at end of vol. ii.

the remains of his writings ; the only other existing manuscript (besides one or two short songs) being a beginning of the reminiscences of a London street-boy. This narrative, entitled *Last Story* in this collection, was dictated partly to his mother, and partly to one of the present editors, William Rossetti, from Oliver's deathbed, at a time when, wasted and exhausted as he was with fever, the brain still worked, though the hand was incapable of holding a pen.

The malady, pyæmia or blood-poisoning, which was to prove fatal in a fortnight, and the origin of which remains still wholly untraced, had now preyed on him for five weeks ; till the once healthy and active youth had become but a trembling hectic incurable, bereft of hearing, and without hope from medical aid. Acute pain had after a while given way to feverous restlessness, as this in turn was to be succeeded by delirium. And what a delirium ! how sad and pity-moving to the agonised watchers round that forlorn couch ! Not the vulgar raving and ribaldry that too often give additional horror to a loved one's death-bed, but a delirium fed from all the fancies of the inventive brain, catching at the commonest incidents to twist them into the phases of a romance invested with beauty of language and style. At times hearers would have

it he was quoting from Shakespeare. Even in the murmurs of slumber a rhythmical intonation, as of prolonged passages of blank verse, could be caught, though no words were distinguishable. A kind of apologue, fashioned by his imagination out of the progress and incidents of his own approaching fate, formed, as it were, a running commentary on it for two days, until insensibility mercifully supervened, and shielded him from further struggles, mental or physical. The yet more inexorable doom of mortal disease was converted by his still teeming brain into an unmerited capital condemnation. Young as he was, he "was condemned to be shot," although, would they but spare his life, he "might have been among the greatest, among those who are most superior," and superiority, in his regard, was ever a matter of intellect and character, not of any conventional standard. He had been tried once; but the government failed to obtain a conviction, and now had recourse to arbitrary measures. Anything red about the room had to be covered up, because, to his wandering imagination, this was the colour of the red-coated soldiers watching him, as his last moments more nearly impended. He was accused of setting fire to some church or public building,—a confused reminiscence of the Parisian Commune, with the incidents of whose story he was familiar. Thomas Carlyle, to screen himself, had,

according to the *Times*, criminated him. This, however, was but a calumny of the press ; he would never believe that one so noble could have so belied his own character. (The name of Carlyle was just now uppermost in his mind, because, in the earlier stage of his illness, he had read through for the first time, and with the deepest interest, that great writer's History of the French Revolution.) With a palsied tremour in each nerve and muscle, he yet repelled all fear, demanding with an oath to see the sergeant of the firing party. Grasping his father's hand, he said with wild extatic eyes, "Courage, father ! You'll need it to-morrow," in anticipation of his fancied execution. When his medical attendant gave him his word that he would not be shot, Oliver, having perfect reliance on his honour, believed him ; yet explained, when the other had left the room, that he knew he was gone to obtain a reprieve from the Queen. Thenceforth, ideas of remission or escape occupied him. The Queen's pardon was expected to arrive at the last moment, but not until then ; nevertheless, money to provide for an escape was desirable, and a sum for this supposed purpose was received with passionate gratitude. Above all, a ring from his mother's hand was required, and was put on his own attenuated finger. But (with a reminiscence from the tradition of Lord Essex) there was the difficulty of getting this ring to the Queen's

sight. Before being laid low with disease, he had once described at length to his sister the plan of a tale which was to consist exclusively of the fever-fit of a man whose real existence should have been quite superseded and brought to nought by a reality to him still more palpable, the logical and well-fitting hallucinations of his delirium. He had here but preconceived his own ending, fated to be so premature and strange.

But the moment was now at hand—how commonplace and yet how supreme!—that was to give rest to all these struggling emotions; rest to labours of his own, and to the strivings of baffled science; the rest of final insensibility to himself, of stupor to the survivors. The young inventor lay sleeping his last sleep,—the sleep perpetual.

So far as the present editors can trace, Oliver Madox Brown had no *personal* enemies, or the fewest possible, while his friends were many and warm. Of these some were youthful, marked out by present capacity and the prospect of future repute; several others were men of mature age, already and not transiently distinguished, who welcomed in him one whom they could treat as an equal, parted from themselves only by the accident—the attaching deficiency, or in some sense the beautiful superiority—of youth. Morbidly sensitive and emotional, or even irritable, by

nature, he yet knew how to turn the edge of his sometimes biting repartees with a geniality that excused them, and ensured friendly acceptance.

We will only recall here two of the distinctive points of his character :—the exceeding and pertinacious delight which, as previously intimated, he took in all his earlier years in the observation of animal life, and the resolute zeal with which he set about authorship in that particular line of study and of writing which he had spontaneously chosen. From the most childish age he would hunt up small beasts of whatever sort; cats, dogs, toads, chamæleons, nested birds that he would track out and watch but never disturb, an armadillo, or a raccoon. “Nolly’s rats” were year-long denizens of the house,—white rats which would run along his shoulders and come to his call; he understood the characters of all these creatures, and peered curiously into their ways, and it may be added that the same genuine instinct was his in noting and eliciting the feelings of children. The reader of the ensuing pages may probably remark how often cats are introduced; this was not through mere casualty or habit of repetition, but through the extreme interest which these animals, along with others, possessed for the young writer. Then as to his habits of investigation in authorship, the diversified and special character of his various tales may of itself be

cited in proof. *The Black Swan* is a story of colonial life and sea life; *The Dwale Bluth* is full of Devonian localism, in dialect, and in the description of scenery, with details of gipsy life and speech interspersed; *Hebditch's Legacy* could not be written until after some insight had been obtained into phases of the legal and military professions; and so on with the other fragments. One of his projects (already referred to) had been a story of Irish life of two or three generations back; for this, as for whatever else he undertook, he had begun to prepare himself by reading and inquiry; he had indeed a remarkable aptitude at perusing books rapidly, getting at the core of them, and remembering both substance and detail. In the last year or two of his life he bought many volumes, and was wont to say, with little or no exaggeration, that he had read every one of them.

These things all lie behind us in the past—bygone, but not forgettable. Death has laid his hand on this highly-gifted youth. He was formed indeed not for Death but for Love; and yet, to quote from a sonnet by his fast friend and brother poet Philip Marston,

“ Death, that is mightier than the loves of men,
Makes all at once an everlasting peace.”

For some, that peace is not all “vacancy and oblivion;” the mind has given itself speech, and an echo of it

survives. His own two or three brief lyrics may yet live, a perturbation to the calm of young hearts tender and sympathetic.

“ Oh longing with sorrow requited !
Oh blossom the storm-winds have blighted,
Deep down in the shadow of death ! ”

A LAMENT.

OLIVER MADOX BROWN.

BORN 1855. DIED 1874.

I.

My friend has left me, he has gone away;
Before his time—so long before—he went.
Bright was the dawn of his unended day;
But love might not, yea, nothing might prevent
The hand of death from striking. Oh fair Art !
First mistress of his intellect and heart,
Of this our common sorrow bear thy part,
Bow down and weep now for the words I say.

II.

His lips are mute, and stilled is the great brain,
The strong heart beats no more, the strife is done;
So near the goal, he reached it without pain,
We crowned him, then he went beyond the sun.

But though he has gone out from us, his name
Shall lessen not with time, and his young fame
Shall burn for ever, an enduring flame,
A stedfast light that may not wax or wane.

III.

Lo, this first work whereby we bowed to him,
Calling him master, though he was so young,
Shall intervening centuries make dim ?

Those sea-tossed lovers who together clung
What time they had for common enemies
The blasting tropic suns, and treacherous seas,
And torture of long thirst they might not ease,
Till hearts began to fail, and brains to swim.

IV.

The years which might have been I seem to see ;
I know the great work ended, and I hear
Rumours of storms and voice of waves that flee ;
I breathe a fierce and fervid atmosphere.
I see strong warriors meet, and armed for war,
I see each helmet shining like a star,
I hear the shock of weapons near and far,
And in the densest of the strife is he.

v.

My friend, my friend, he strikes with confident hand,
I hear the blows ring on opposing shields,
And none I know his prowess may withstand ;
I know the shield he bears, the sword he wields ;
Before his strength I see his foes give place,
And in my heart I see a spectre race
Look with glad eyes upon his lifted face,
They who inhabit now the flowerless land.

vi.

Defoe and Richardson and Scott, and those
Two sisters whose fair names shine ever clear,
Charlotte, and patient Emily who chose
To take a path where none might follow her ;
Like him she left one work for monument,
And songs that keep the keen sweet heather-scent,
And like him too before her time she went,
To be where quiet is and deep repose.

vii.

Oh friend and brother, if this thing might be,
That souls live after death, the great elect,
Should throng the portals to give hail to thee ;
And they thy wandering footsteps should direct,

Should take thee where the fairest gardens glow,
Should take thee where the deepest rivers flow ;
Should point thee o'er the faces thou shouldst know,
And linger with thee by the jasper sea.

VIII.

But perfect rest is now thy heritage,
And though the labour of thy hand and brain
Had made thy life triumphant, none engage
To point the world new paths without the strain
Of long and arduous fighting. Oh my friend,
Not thine, *our* loss this unimagined end.
Life is not sweet, but sharp with thorns that rend ;
And the soul's thirst, what springs in life assuage ?

IX.

Fame is not always good,—remember this,
All ye with whom I mourn—who mourn with me ;
Nor is love always a sure path to bliss,
And time works many changes sad to see.
And 'twixt the dearest friends estrangements rise,
Across wide gulfs they look with longing eyes;
But they have done with questions and replies,
And sad and very hard to bear this is.

X.

London I never loved for London's sake,
Her crowds oppressed me more than solitude ;
But some far music his fine ear could take,
Mine failed to catch ; yea, since he found her good,
Loved the strong ebb and flow of fluctuant life,
The night's uneasy calm, the day's loud strife,
Found all her ancient streets with memories rife,
Shall I not love her too, asleep, awake ?

XI.

Oh friend, my friend, there is so much to tell
Since that September night we met on last,
Dreams have passed by and hopes have said farewell.
Oh love that lives, and life that soon is past !
From where he is he may not make reply,
Too far away he is to hear my cry,
Love weeps for us, for him love may not sigh,
And grief saith but one word irreparable.

XII.

We talked about our future many times,
Planned work together, jested, and were grave,
And now he will not listen to my rhymes.
My sorrow breaks above me in one wave,

For he has left me, he has gone away
To lands that do not know the night from day,
Where men toil not, neither give thanks nor pray,
Where come no rumours from the sounding chimes.

XIII.

Oh men and women, listen and be wise,
Refrain from love and friendship, dwell alone,
Having for friends and loves the seas, the skies,
And the fair land, for these are still your own.
The sun is yours, the moon and stars are yours,
For you the great sea changes and endures,
And every year the spring returns, and lures :
I pray you only love what never dies.

XIV.

For life hath taught me with much diligence
That bitterest sorrow springs from things most fair:
Remorseless death that calls those loved ones hence
Who living gave us strength our cross to bear,
The failure of high purposes, the death
Of fairest inspiration, the quick breath,
The ebbing light, and the last words one saith,
The dust and sleep and death for recompense.

XV.

I know it was of his a favourite creed
That when the body dies the existing soul
Of other souls becomes a fruitful seed,
Changing, existing through the years that roll ;
Flashing continually from state to state,
Not ceasing with the lives that terminate,
A part of life, of destiny, of fate,
The germ and the fulfilment, thought and deed.

XVI.

Here, where I stumbled, he walked sure of foot ;
And here more clear than mine his spirit's sight ;
His high thought sprang from no uncertain root ;
His intellect was like the broad noon-light ;
He stemmed the tide of passion strong and deep,
He walked most confidently up paths most steep,
And by the way he loved he fell asleep,
And of his life we gather now the fruit.

XVII.

I clasp another sorrow in my soul,
I take another memory to keep,
To love and cherish while the seasons roll,
To think of while I wake or fall asleep.

The weary winter-time shall pass, and spring,
The patient earth at last revisiting,
With soft and flowerlike skies, and birds that sing,
Shall come most hearts to gladden and make whole.

XVIII.

But mine she shall not gladden ; I for one
By all her sweets will not be comforted.
The summer days shall come with stress of sun,
The placid light of summer stars be shed ;
With dew at eve the roses shall be sated
And all the earth by slumber softly weighted ;
But love shall keep its sorrow unabated
Till all the fears and pains of life be done.

XIX.

And now I bring to sweeten thy repose
All rarest odours wed to delicate tints,
Chrysanthemums, and violets, and rose,
With laurel leaves, and the wild hyacinths ;
And I have kissed the flowers and bade them be
My messengers of love to speak for me,
The last, last gift that I shall give to thee,
Unwitting now of any flower that blows.

xx.

Alas ! what can be said ? What can we do ?

Ah me ! we have no words,—we can but wait,—
Wait and remember where the years wear through.

Life is at longest but a brief estate ;
As a flower of the field, the Psalmist saith,
It blooms and the fashion of it perisheth ;
We cannot tell when we may chance on death,
To be resolved into the light, the dew.

xxi.

Oh friends ! who sit together well content,
Throwing your personal news out pleasantly,
Or meeting hotly in some argument,
Or interchanging deepest sympathy,
Prize well the precious moments, for indeed
You cannot tell when you may sorely need
The friendly talk and counsel. Take good heed
Your lips let through no word they might repent.

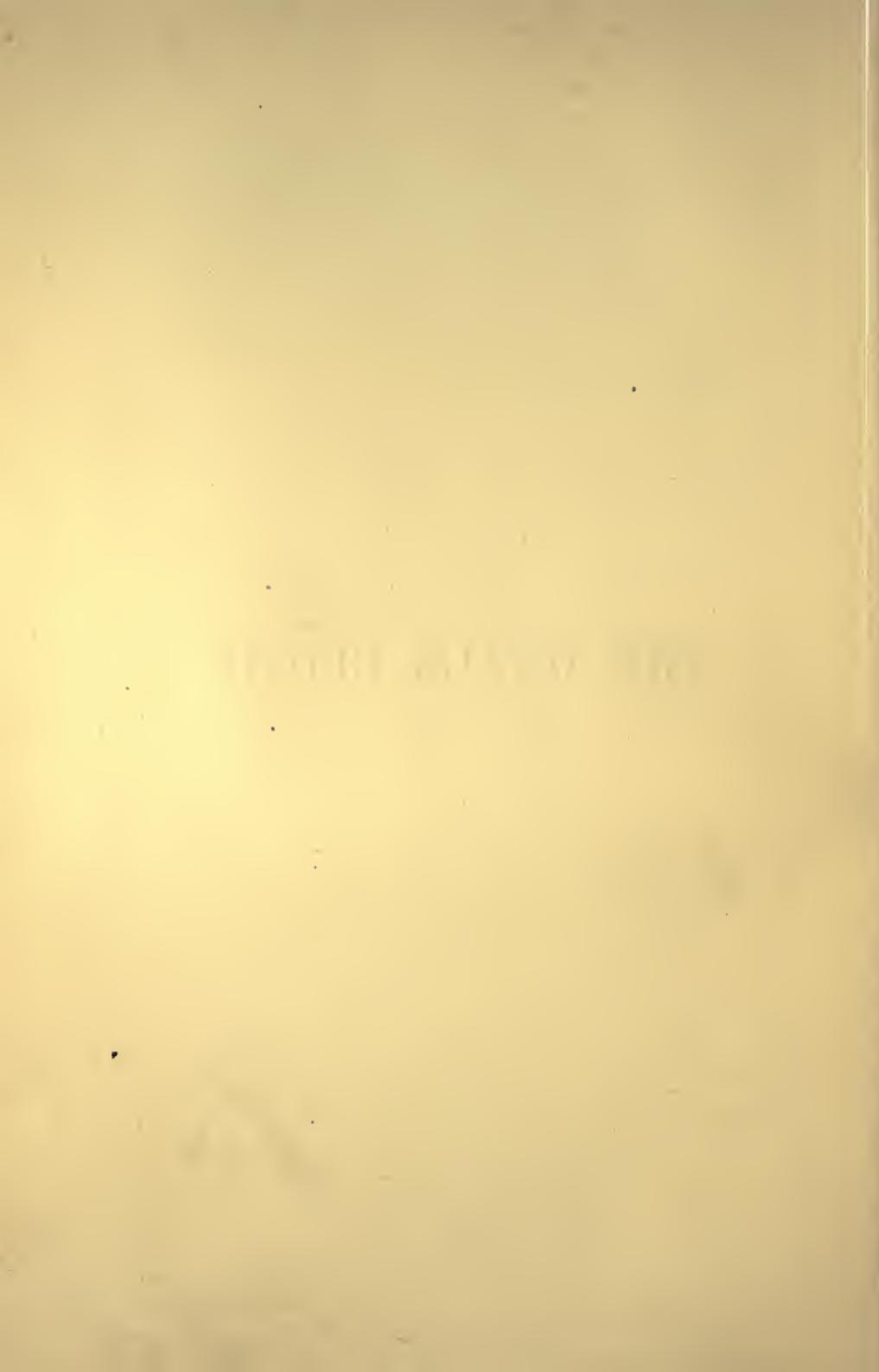
xxii.

Sleep well, my friend, the sleep that no dreams break,
I too some day of sleep shall take my fill ;
But now I live, and work for mere work's sake,
Missing the strength of thy controlling will.

I know my soul through all shall thirst and fret
For thee, for thee whom time may not forget ;
And when I see dear friends together met,
I know my heart will fail in me and ache.

PHILIP BOURKE MARSTON.

THE DWALE BLUTH.



THE DWALE BLUTH.

INTRODUCTION.

CHAPTER I.

TANTARABOB'S HUXEN.

WATERN TOR was a wild-enough hill to have built one's house under—even without the reputation it bore; which by itself should have been sufficient to warn any ordinary family from the spot in those strange old days.

* * * * *

The object whose appellation does duty at the head of this our first chapter—"Tantarabob's Huxen," or the Devil's Ankle-blade—was a huge wind-bleached granite logan-stone, crowning the hill above-mentioned, and of great renown in that quarter of Dartmoor; for it had been hurled down in its present position by the devil, it was named after, *in propriâ personâ*, by way of propitiating a party of his warlike Walana worshippers then in want of an altar whereon to sacrifice to him their captives. Two thousand years have rolled away since then, and you can see the blood-stains on it still: or you can at least under certain conditions. If you obstinately go up in broad

daylight, you certainly do *not*; for they only really display themselves at twilight, little by little, with a ghastly ever-increasing phosphorescence and luminousness—until at last, in the final darkness at midnight, the whole stone coats itself (as they whose friends have seen it declare) with one crimson quivering flame of blood; with which the earth in every direction turns luminous, too. All through the last century you could have witnessed this any night you chose—(though only one person did, however, in the cognizance of man: a drunken, dissolute Moreton “tinner,” the magic glow cast in whose face “did most villainously discoloure and empurple the features thereof for ever after,” as is circumstantially narrated by one authority, who seems to have obtained his knowledge from the victim himself). Meanwhile, as the night deepens, horrid wailings and warwhoops resound indiscriminately along the hillside; menacing taunts or threats—heart-rending agonized entreaties; all in one mysterious unknown tongue. No human voice could equal the terror and tumult of those cries, which sob and rise and fall as no tempest ever did at its wildest. But the strangest fact of all is that though you hear them plainly, yet the very loudest of these voices dies out, utterly echoless and isolated—a marvellous thing, indeed, among these Dartmoor hills, where the slightest footfall of your own mocks you for half a mile round. At twelve p.m., however, in one wild last shriek the noise comes to an end. Then the stone itself rises solemnly and walks off down the hill, across the moors below, until it comes at last to the Walbrook River, whence it plunges bodily under the stream, and there struggles desperately to cleanse its blood away. In the early

morning, just ere “cock’s light,” it climbs out in despair and comes back to Watern Tor; and as the sunlight breaks across the hill-tops the terrible stains die away by themselves, till nightfall calls them out again. . . . But people said Serpleton House had been constructed ere these eccentric phenomena manifested themselves to its inmates; and, anyhow, its occupants were such a rash wrong-headed set, that even when they *did* discover the nightly saturnalia overhead, they absolutely refused to go away again; so there stands Serpleton House even now. True it is certainly that some slight effort was made to remove the stone instead; or at least the chronicler says so; but as “no craft or strength might avail to move it with any ease” (when not inclined to move on its own account), and as it came back of its own accord nine times running when it *was* moved, and as the horses and men employed on the work “expired shortly after in violent convulsions,”—it was considered prudent at last, they say, to leave the Huxen to its own devices; so there it, too, lies; threatening hourly to fall on the house below and lowering out against the sky to the present day, reader: an infallible voucher to the veracity of the legend it concerns.

CHAPTER II.

DESIDERATA CURIOSA.

IN the autumn, examined from the bridle-paths across the distant heights, Serpleton House—but for its pointed gables and the thin wreaths of smoke from its chimneys—might

have been taken for one of those huge white fragments of rock with which the northern heights of Dartmoor are strewn so wildly, projecting from the hillside in a profusion of purple heather and golden furze-blossom. In the spring the ancient apple-trees along its unenclosed orchards grew radiant in the windy sunlight, under the blue sky, among the purple cloud shadows. But in the winter, with the keen boisterous east wind, heavy with mist and sleet, driving across the sterile moorlands and whistling harshly through its crevices—turning its chimneys and corridors into a monstrous series of organ-pipes, and playing sinister tunes on them—Serpleton House must have looked dreary indeed for a human dwelling-place.

All round its garden-walls, in profoundest silence and seclusion, lay these wild moorlands for miles upon miles; every rock and streamlet of them once tenanted by its especial water-sprite or moor-stepper; for among the peasantry of a place like Dartmoor the imagination of one single man breeds terrors like these for twenty generations;—the Bishop of Exeter would as soon turn materialist as the indwelling population cease to credit them. In the fogs you might have heard the river-spirits emerging from their streams; sometimes coloured and spotted like newts, sometimes in human form, hunting and crying aloud for their prey,

“ Undescribèd sounds
That come a-swooning over hollow grounds,
And wither drearily on barren moors.”

Woe worth the wretch they could have laid their hands on at such a moment, benighted, helpless, and in their power!

“River of Dart! River of Dart!
Every month thou claimest a heart!”

And in the snow you could have traced the footsteps of the piskies (or “pigsneys” as they called them once), “one shoe off and one shoe on,”—wandering round in long swift magic circles, they themselves invisible.

In the late midsummer twilights came the fearful chase of the yeth or wish-hounds—a beautiful lady in front, her long hair flying behind her, a pack of black fiery-nostrilled hounds and horsemen in rear. . . .

Woe, woe, and a triple woe, to the traveller who crossed their path that night!

Indeed few of the peasants or servants would have trusted themselves out on to the moors round Serpleton House after nightfall a hundred years ago.

* * * * *

And the Serpletons themselves?

But indeed they were ever a wayward and a graceless race from their commencement, we are told.

The family would seem in some remote degree connected with the Tracy lineage, one of whose ancestors was a ring-leader in the martyrdom of St. Thomas a'Becket; and the curse laid on the murtherer and on all his descendants was even transmitted into the Serpleton race as well—by the intermarriage of “certain nephews or nieces of names unknown,” we are led to infer.

“Woe to the unborn sons of the Tracys,
With ever the wind and rain in their faces!”

said the rhyme. For until some connection of the Tracy family could reach the holy shrine at Jerusalem, and there

purify himself, their Maker had ordained no peace for them here in this world, nor in the world hereafter ; and whenever any repentant relative did set sail with such an intention, the wind invariably turned, “and drove the oars backward even unto whence they came,” a circumstance which after a trial or two must have proved somewhat disheartening, one can but think.

But people had strange ideas of God in those days ; the deity of one man being in most cases the devil of every other who chose to oppose his *protégé*.

Anyhow, the first member of the Serpleton family who obtained any real notoriety was a certain quarrelsome cock-fighting, badger-drawing, hard-swearers, and still harder-drinking Devonshire squire, Sir Godfrey Basil Serpleton by name ; who having fought against the Puritans in his youth, and helped in maturer age to bring back the king again, of sacred memory, once was called up to London and knighted for his pains ; and who afterwards expended the greater portion of his patrimony in the further acquirement of a baronetcy, an honour which (together somewhat with the dis— or gaiety rather of the capital) turned his brain, they say, so that he ultimately died in a madhouse, chained up like a wild beast, as was lawful and customary in the good old times of which we treat. Sir Godfrey’s freaks and follies are not forgotten yet ; and the son who succeeded him was mainly as bad as himself, an unruly disreputable scapegrace ; who being elected to the House of Commons, and taking umbrage at some innocent ministerial observation, drew his sword from its scabbard, like his father before him, and issued an open challenge to every member present and willing to abide by it, from the Speaker

downwards; refusing to apologise for which breach of privilege, he was locked up in the cellars below and deservedly expelled. In his old age he too lost what little sense he possessed, and died, leaving behind him a son, who, if not a lunatic like himself, was even more ungovernably reckless and intemperate.

Sir Geoffry, the third baronet, then lived till near sixty, though they called him the hardest drinker for twenty miles around, which was saying something at that time; and truly; for the last five years of his existence he is affirmed only *once* to have been found sober after nightfall.

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH THE READER IS INTRODUCED TO AN ENGLISH COUNTRY GENTLEMAN OF THE OLD SCHOOL, AND TO THE DANGER OF SITTING DOWN THIRTEEN AT TABLE.

ON this memorable occasion it would appear that old Sir Geoffry Serpleton and a party of sworn friends met together one Christmas-tide, in the year of our Lord 1727, with a firm intention of enjoying themselves after their own fashion; and ere they parted many were the songs whose choruses the walls of Serpleton House echoed under that night; riotous old love or hunting catches, more or less melodious, long lost or forgotten; and many were the jests they broke between them. Never had Sir Geoffry seemed in better spirits, jovial-hearted as he ever was; you could

have heard him out on the hills round Watern Tor. Anyhow, the career of these doughty topers was prolonged through the night to an early hour the next morning. But at last Mrs. Drusilla Hibbledeen, the baronet's housekeeper, rousing from her slumbers at her customary hour, found it still dark, and not wishing to waste candle-light, determined to lie quiet in her bed a few minutes longer.

Half awake and half asleep she listened drowsily to the din and confusion overhead.

Presently, just as she was dropping off to sleep again, she was called to mind by one of the revellers above, who slid helplessly from his chair, shaking the floor and rattling the windows sharply in their sashes.

It was a familiar sound enough to her.

On her wrinkled finger-joints, she in the course of half an hour had added eleven other thuds to that, as the guests, following their friend's example, gave way one after another, and rolled promiscuously under her master's hospitable board.

But there was a thirteenth to the party, and she lay a long while listening for him too. Nothing happened however; his wits had given in before she woke, seemingly.

Then, throwing off her nightcap, and with her teeth chattering (just as the yellow dawn broke vaguely among the frost-bitten clouds in the east), she got out of bed; preparing, as was her wont, to set to rights the room in which they all lay—to move a leg or an arm here and there, or loosen a cravat. The door was not easy to open, however, for one of the inmates had fallen against it. At last she effected an entrance, and glanced round her. A cheerless frosty sunbeam, streaming in through

the half-opened shutter, had fallen full on the puckered face and grey hairs of Sir Geoffry Serleton the baronet, who still sat bolt upright in his chair, grasping a glass half filled, and with its stem knocked off. His eyes stared straight in front of him with a ghastly unaverted look—his features were convulsed but motionless—his arms and hands were rigid. The fire had long gone out; but two or three of the candles still guttered in their sockets. These, with the pallid resplendence of the sunbeam, enabled his old servant to perceive the warm breath issuing freely from the open lips and nostrils of her master's comrades—not to mention other tokens given forth among them; but there was no perceptible sense of vitality on Sir Geoffry's own lips. And indeed, terrified as she was, she saw in an instant how her master was in a condition of sobriety destined never again to be disturbed.

It seemed from the expression of his face as though the sunlight had reached him ere he was quite dead, and he had been striving helplessly to shut his paralysed eyelids, or avoid it in some way.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SAME CONTINUED AT GREAT BREVITY.

THE first of the party that regained sufficient sensibility to articulate plainly is said to have been—of all men in the world—the parish clergyman! There was, however, an utter blank in his memory—save that he recollect

noticing the ominous number who sat down the day before ; at which Sir Geoffry burst into wild laughter, to the dismay of all present for a time, until they had forgotten it again. And as to the others, put out of countenance as one may expect them to have been, they remembered nothing whatsoever.

The eldest son was absent at the time.

CHAPTER V.

WHICH THOSE WHO PREFER THEIR NERVES UNRUFFLED
HAD BETTER AVOID.

BUT nine days after, a grand funeral *cortège*, escorted by these same estimable friends and by a few others, set out on foot to cross the moor in the direction of Limmerston, where the churchyard lay. Things went on well enough for a while ; but happening, quite accidentally and against their will, to make a slight *détour*, they were forced to pass a certain little inn or hostelry which then existed on the road ; where resting from their labours they unanimously endeavoured to drown their sorrows in a keg of French brandy brought to light in honour of the occasion.

In brief, the undertakers who carried the coffin, grew even more garrulous and unsteady in their gait than the mourners themselves.

Shortly after this it came on to rain.

And in the subsequent fog the procession missed its way.

Presently, indeed, coming to an unusually steep and slippery hillside, we are led to infer it missed its footing into the bargain,—for dropping the coffin, and laudably losing their respective balances in a spasmodic attempt to recover it again, its followers all rolled one over another into an immense slough at the bottom; where they rested themselves for a while, we are told, until the fog had somewhat cleared away again.

When at last they reached their destination, only one half their number is said to have been present—that half being very uproarious too.

The brief winter's day was fast drawing to a close by then; the officiating curate, giving up the case as hopeless, had gone home to his fireside. But the sexton, who was still present, offered to proceed without him, or leave the service to be said next day if possible—saying audibly that, in a case where so many “passons” would be required to change the deceased's destiny as at present, one “round-shaving”* more or less would scarcely matter.

Then absolutely and utterly astounding the whole party, he demanded in a tone of amazement:

“Where's th' coffin gone to?”

A question which (simplicity personified as it was) appeared to strike them all dumb!

Where was the coffin?

But the mourners gazed stupidly in each other's faces—none had wasted a thought on it till then.

It was no good discussing the matter—the coffin had evidently played them some mysterious trick or other; all they could do was to wait till the morning's light collected

* Prayer-meeting—discourse.

their scattered wits and enabled them to search for it. What could a respectable coffin mean by making off with itself in that fashion? In the night-time, however, a violent snow-storm arose and came down on the moors—one such as had not been seen for years, it was said. This endured for whole days and nights without a pause; and when at last the angels and their wings had finished moulting (which an old Devonshire belief avows as primary cause of all snow-storms), the angelic feathers still lay in deep drifts over the ground, showing no disposition to melt whatsoever. Indeed, on the contrary, they seem to have frozen so hard as to preclude the possibility of all search till the February thaw set in, six weeks later. . . . Meanwhile, it was whispered about the country that a large hole had somehow got broken in the upper lid of the coffin; and that while carrying the coffin itself (upside down) the bearers had become aware of the dead man's face glaring at them through this aperture in a hideous and ghastly fashion—which so smote them with surprise that they flung down their charge and made off without further ceremony. This however was not of the strictest veracity; for when the thaw was sufficiently advanced Sir Geoffry Serpleton's last home was discovered—intact, though sunk at the bottom of a ditch, whence it was finally conveyed to its resting-place.

Seeing thus what they were, one may well imagine the eccentricities of the three last owners to have not a little diminished the revenues of the Serpleton estates. Sir Jasper, the next heir, lived very handsomely for a time nevertheless; and two sons were born to him ere in 1790 he too paid the final debt of nature. Oliver the youngest,

sickly and studious from his childhood, entered the church ; Jeffery the eldest being what they termed a thorough “ blind blossom ” from the first. There was also a sister, who married early a younger son of the Haentou family, and went to reside at Lynmouth on the North Coast. Despite Jeffery’s failings Sir Jasper loved him passionately ; Oliver on the contrary, whose mother died giving birth to him, was never a favourite in any way. Advanced in years as he was when he married, the loss of his wife was a bereavement from which Jasper had no chance of recovering, and as the unconscious cause of which he never forgave his son. “ Get thee gone out o’ my sight, Noll!—I can’t abear the daps o’ thee,” he said to him the last time they met : and truly his treatment of the poor boy was commented on all over the country—people said that in the first passion of his grief he wished to have the child cast out and exposed on the “ yavils ” or moors round where it first saw the light. All men have their weaknesses ; but, towards the end, those of Sir Jasper grew unbearable. The only person who dared stay near him at last was the grand-daughter of his father’s housekeeper, mentioned in the last chapter ; now an old woman herself. At length towards the end of the above-mentioned year he was found in a fit, gnawing the leg of his table it was said—utterly frantic and senseless, his will crumpled up in his hand though otherwise intact. On opening this at his death, the family lawyers found that Oliver was left dependent on his own resources—to wit, a curate’s stipend of fifty pounds a year. To tell the truth, there was not much to leave, save the crippled and ruined remnant of a once vast estate, which of course went to Jeffery. It seems almost

too terrible to add, that the father left his written curse to the youngest son in a codicil (shortly after writing which, by the bye, he must have fallen off his chair); but it must be remembered that it was drawn up at a time when for three weeks he had been in a morbid condition which can but be described as madness. In that state he one night drove his eldest son, the future Sir Jeffery, out of the house with a horse-whip for venturing to remonstrate with him. After this, Jeffery had deserted him, with all the others. And six months later at his father's death, the son was still nowhere to be found, though his name ("Geoffy! Geoffy!") was the last word on the old man's withered lips. Sir Jasper was buried beside his father, Sir Geoffry.

"They say his eyen glinted like quick yemberes, when a' läy by th' warl at larst!" said one of the grave-diggers, when the few mourners were gone, in a somewhat awed whisper; for the coffin was still visible.

"Zo a' did in hisen lifetime!" answered another, rattling the sand down unceremoniously. "A' had a vund o' deviltry in un—t'ould jib hoss!"

"'Pil'm adrowed ter pil'm' (dust to dust) says Pearson?" exclaimed a third as the coffin once and for all disappeared under the showers of sand. "Pearson maun a' ment vire ter vire! Dang ma buttons nif Setten's nainself *daunt warnt ter bä shut on un avoer yule tide—Sir Jesper 'ull meck hell tew het ter hold on un!"

* * * * *

* Doesn't want to be rid of him.

BOOK I.—THE BIRTH of the HEROINE.

CHAPTER I.

MATRIMONIAL DEVELOPMENTS.

MEANWHILE that notoriously restless blind blossom, Jasper's son, Sir Jeffery, was conjectured to have shipped as a common sailor and gone off on a voyage to Virginia ; but in reality had his Devonian neighbours held him to have gone forth like Epicurus's intellect—*extra flammantia mœnia mundi* and into the realms of eternity itself—his whereabouts could scarce have been less defined, as far as most of them were concerned. Then an indefinite report got circulated, affirming him to be wandering somewhere in the "South" (whether in Spain, Italy, or France, not specified) ; a locality which in those days was chiefly associated with the name of one Napoleon Bonaparte—an individual much looked down upon and despised by the simple-minded gentry of the shire. But during all this time no soul could have spoken positively even of Sir Jeffery's very existence.

But at last, when least expected and when he must have been about forty-seven, Sir Jeffery came back to North Devonshire, with a shaggy black moustache and a sun-burnt face ; and came back accompanied, moreover, by a young woman whom he had brought with him from the

province of Estremadura in Spain ; having fallen desperately in love with and “married her at first sight,” it was whispered. Some said she was an Egyptian—others solemnly affirmed her to be of Moorish origin ; while even the vague rumour that she was a black negress was not unfavourably received in the parishes most distant from where they lived ; and hence many wild but significant legends got abroad, and much “pistering an’ whistering” of a more or less scandalous nature, rose like an evil vapour in the wind of public opinion.

Those who actually *were* acquainted with the fifth Lady Serpleton knew her to be a swarthy dark-complexioned girl, with marvellously brilliant eyes, black curved eyebrows, and deep red lips—lips which laughed perpetually, it seemed. Her eyeballs were so replete with light and fire that to examine their absolute colour was almost impossible ; sometimes the very moths used to grow bewildered, and flutter round them, it was said. No one who set eyes on the Spaniard ever seems to have approved of her, while those who had not seen her were even more vehement in their denunciations. These passionate manifestations of disregard seemed, however, in no degree to disturb the young lady’s equanimity ; she was either laughing, singing, or losing her temper, all day long. Speaking purely from my own point of view, I think she must have been very beautiful. Her whole system was tremulous and palpitating with the vivacity which youth and perfect health alone can bestow ; her feet and limbs never seemed quiet for one instant. The power and fascination which she exercised over her companion appeared irresistible, as well they might be. . . . Ere long it became known that the baronet and

his wife had taken up their residence at Watern Tor; without a single attendant and quite by themselves.

Serpleton House (in which occurred Sir Jasper's death) had long been deserted by all save Margery Wilmot his old housekeeper, who, "monarch of all she surveyed" (having lived there twelve years now in her solitary dignity), can by no means be said to have expressed any great sense of satisfaction on learning whom she was to have set over her in the capacity of mistress. "Lock ! Lock ! ther'll be vine messings an' muckings avore zennet, che'll warndy !" she exclaimed dolefully.

Well acquainted with her own disposition, she prophesied truly.

For ere the lapse of three hours even, an unintermittent warfare raged between this worthy if antiquated personage and her fair Spanish mistress—conducted mainly with joyful light-hearted grimaces on one side, and equally sour or spiteful looks on the other. The very first moment of their arrival, Margery's instinct told her too well what she was only too ready to believe, that Sir Jeffery's wife was turning both herself and her quaint costume into ridicule. Lady Serpleton, in fact, fell into a perfect fit of hysterics over a certain venerable pair of clogs, which the worthy servant had inherited from her mother and had held in high esteem during the fifty summers and winters which had passed over her own head. Now Margery, although not over sensitive with regard to her own personal identity, was nevertheless very resentful of any slight which might be cast upon the items of her personal *property*. She took this appearance of disrespect very ill. Perhaps a vision of what her light-hearted mistress would

do when she should catch sight of what she termed her "paraplut" * crossed her mind, for even the simple people round her were in the habit of laughing at that. In consequence, she had grown particularly exacting concerning the respect to be paid to this one article of her many acquisitions. It may be that she still partly remembered the pride she had felt on first possessing it, long years back: perhaps she inwardly doubted its extreme infallibility after all. Now most people have a great objection to being confirmed by others in their own scepticism, for in spite of everything we would fain persuade ourselves to linger in the old beliefs of our childhood.

Now Mrs. Wilmot, as she delighted to be called, grew very morose if she spied even the remotest chance of her own authority being set aside; and many chances seemed to rise and be arrayed in her mind like clouds scudding over a winter-sky. She had a great objection to stranger-folk "gwain ragging an' scanting rowze th' darn," she said wrathfully, as her new mistress ran breathlessly over the house, "straming" doors which should have remained open, and opening those which should have been closed. She had to conceal her very spinning-wheel in a cupboard; for the girl found it, and sat twirling it round till the mechanism of the machine threatened to fly asunder and the well-arranged flax was hopelessly entangled. The shutters had all to be unbolted; this aggravated her soul exceedingly, for it necessitated their being closed again at night: she had never seen the like for thirteen years.

Poor Margery might well be said to have resembled one of those dwarf crab-apple-trees, which, left entirely dependent

* "Parapluie."

on their own exertions, fructify and do well enough ; but if once they are interfered with, they twist and distort themselves out of all recognition. The more they are opposed the more cantankerous they become.

Her fear of the girl was even greater than her dislike ; perhaps this is why she never openly ventured to oppose her. Margery was reported to be, above all, of a most authoritative disposition ; she was said to have ruled her late husband (in whose company she spent five years and seven months) “with a rod of iron.” Indeed, it must have caused her much trouble to repress her constantly rising indignation. But if one thing gave greater offence to her than all the rest together, it was the helpless way in which her old predominant curiosity was baffled by the never-ceasing conversation which went on in the Spanish tongue between the husband and wife. So long and vainly did she listen at different chinks and keyholes that, owing to the draughts, she caught a bad cold, and repeatedly startled the two by her loud and unexpected sneezes.

Why Margery took so much trouble for nothing I cannot say : perhaps she thought that Dolores might know English after all and could speak it when she chose ; anyhow she listened most pertinaciously whenever she had an opportunity. In the privacy of the back kitchen (where long seclusion had given her a habit of holding conversation with herself), she would express her opinion with astonishing volubility concerning the wild “outlandisher,” as she called her mistress. Then, when in a more than usually bitter frame of mind, she would sweep the floor, worry the saucepans, shake her well-fed cat out of its favourite chair, and even fling dish-clouts or saucepan lids

after the astonished animal, till it must have thought its mistress had taken leave of her senses. Dolores herself, being ignorant of all this, remained in such tolerable peace of mind as her condition would admit; for *“th’ strame was up by th’ strave I reckon,” her time was “now nart,” as the housekeeper informed one of her Cranberry gossips; in other less symbolical words she was about to become a mother. It was in preparation for this event that she had come to Serpleton House.

Serpleton himself, noticing the visible discontentment of his housekeeper, merely smiled ironically and told her not to mind. They would not remain there longer than they could help, he said. Margery had nursed him in her arms some forty years previously, and he still retained a considerable amount of regard for her, although he refused to answer any of the inquiries she made of him. He himself had never been her favourite, the natural course of her perversity having led her to espouse his brother’s cause. Indeed, she had nourished Oliver at her very breast when her own child died, and this is a tie which remains sacred in the eyes of a woman, come what may.

At last, one sunny morning late in September 1811, the country doctor rode in suddenly from across the moors. Behind him on a pillion, with her arms clasping him affectionately, was seated the “wise woman” or “groaning dame,” from the neighbouring village of Cranberry. Among the numerous articles which her bundle contained one must not omit to notice a huge pincushion pierced with pins till it looked like a steel hedgehog.

Shortly after this, towards three in the afternoon, little

* The stream was up to the bridge.

Helen Serpleton appeared in the world: a strong-limbed swarthy babe, with bright sloe-black eyes and lungs, the qualification of which, she was by no means reticent in testing. Mother and child went on as well as might have been expected in the salubrious air. Soon (indeed, in less than a fortnight) the Spaniard was up and walking about. She carried her child at her bare brown breast, and suckled it at intervals: Margery's ideas of propriety were shocked to observe that when not hanging at her bosom, the sleeping infant was slung over the mother's back in a red kerchief. The Moreton doctor ceased his visits, and told many strange anecdotes concerning the affair among his scattered circle of patients; the invaluable services of Mrs Thomasin Lyng had been dispensed with several days before; she had gone off in a high state of indignation at some disparagement—fancied or real—thrown upon her professional achievements by the young mother's conduct. A constant altercation had gone on between her and Margery, though both were always willing to join amicably in the abuse of the common object of their dislike. But now the old house was once more undisturbed in its seclusion, save that the baby's voice was heard at intervals, or its mother's became audible as she half-moaned, half-sang it to sleep.

Even Margery was moved by the devotion Dolores displayed for her offspring. Many were the recipes and remedies she longed vainly to bestow upon the devoted baby; at the slightest manifestation of blackness in the face, or the faintest symptoms of rigidity about the toes and fingers, her anxiety would become dreadful to contemplate.

Helen had the sweetest little hands and feet; they were so small that the fond mother could place them in her own mouth, though the baby was usually employed performing this service for herself; now and then, aided by her soft gums, she seemed to be making long and careful calculations as to the actual amount of fingers and toes she really possessed, but it was a difficult and problematical point, if one could have judged by the frown which dimpled her wide brows at such intervals.

Dolores, the mother, was a jealous mother, with a sharply defined notion of her own rights, and all intervention on the old servant's part proved worse than useless. It never occurred to her, perhaps, that having been a mother herself was no particular proof that she should understand the management of the child better than its own mother. The difficulty of intercommunication was also very great, for even if the father could be found to explain matters to, he only laughed when informed that his daughter would soon be "crewnting wi' croop," or "buddling itsel'" with its tiny dimpled fist. At last she was reduced to shrugging her shoulders and muttering, "Thou'l't * vend out th' rearts on't bamby, mä braw vine lasses!" a consoling observation which signified that both mother and child would one day regret her neglected services. But the wrinkled old woman still continued to wish the baby well in her own fashion, despite the indifference she affected to regard it with. This was perhaps because it brought some peace to the household; for, after its birth, Dolores seemed to take no more pleasure in annoying her. Indeed, the baby might be said to have appeared in the establishment much as a star

* Find out the rights of it by-and-by.

breaks suddenly through the clouds of a storm, and proves them to be drifting asunder and ready to disperse: with a little management, it could easily have been made the cause of a complete reconciliation between them both; for Dolores could not have contented herself for ever, by pointing out and explaining Helen's phenomenal merits to her husband alone. But an event soon happened which placed all these latent possibilities out of the question.

If Margery had been an expert in "outlander talk," or "dwaling," as she otherwise termed it, she would have recognized, in the songs which the young and beautiful mother sometimes sang to soothe her child's vigorous outcries, a language which differed considerably from her usual speech. One of these short songs was so exquisite in rhythm that I cannot help introducing a specimen of a translation I have managed to come across through the kindness of a friend. It is not a very happy one, however, for scientific linguists seldom make good poets.

"The growth of love's fruit is
Most meet to eat;
Yet a snare where the root is
Entangles the feet.

"To passion no stop is
When true love hath sinned;
But the flower that love's crop is
Droops dead i' the wind."

(But Margery was no linguist; she could just manage to spell out her Bible, and that was all. Now there was some peculiarity connected with this, which is too characteristic to be passed over. The Bible she used was not an authorized edition, but only an old badly-translated black letter copy, which must have been handed down in her

family for three or four generations. It was printed in crabbed early-English characters. She would have had just as much difficulty in reading the ordinary style of modern printing as other uneducated people would have in reading from the ancient text.)

When Helen was five weeks old her father left Serpleton House to ride twenty miles across the moors and into the country beyond : he rode to visit his brother whom he had not seen for so many years. Dolores was left alone.

It so happened that, the day after his departure, an evil-looking detachment of dark-skinned gipsies came across the heaths and settled down near Cranberry Farm gate, on a patch of "venville" common. They aggravated old Rabbie Thurlstone, the tenant, beyond all measure ; for they built their huts by weaving the furze and brambles from one to another of the batch of posts which he had set up for his "kees" to rub their sides against. The poor cattle were thus deprived of the enjoyment of an exercise which was justly termed "kine's comfort" by the Devonians. They were reduced to standing at a distance with their backs turned to the wind, and their heads set dolefully towards the dirty encampment. The day after that, several ugly-looking children were observed wandering about the hills at Watern Tor : from an upper window in the house, Margery, to her astonishment, saw the Spaniard talking with one of them ; they seemed to understand each other's language.

The same afternoon, coming out by her back kitchen-door, she found herself face to face with a bright-eyed, dirty, and most disreputable urchin. This youth turned promptly from his rapt inspection of her hen-house, and fled over

the wall and away through the apple-orchard, followed by her menacing outeries. She knew only too well that some mischief was intended, and wrung her hands: the indignation and disgust the sight of a gipsy inspired her with are perfectly indescribable. She must have had dealings with these eccentric people before in her life.

That night the fowls were unusually clamorous, and the cock crowed thrice in the darkness. She got up and listened attentively, but everything was silent; nothing was visible by the glimmer of the rushlight she held out of window, and she went to bed again. In the morning a large hole was found torn in the lattice-work, a few feathers were blowing about, but the birds were gone.

It was a cunningly-executed theft; one well worthy of the sinister reputation which distinguished the gipsies in those days.

Margery's outeries were much louder than those of the fowls, when at length she could persuade herself to believe in what had taken place during her sleep. Even the young Spaniard was alarmed by them, for she got up and dressed herself quickly, and came down without her baby. By her gestures she was apparently inquiring what was the matter, but, on seeing Margery standing wringing her hands beside the broken wires, she seemed to comprehend thoroughly. Instead of sympathizing in the way the old servant might have expected, the girl burst into a violent fit of laughter which lasted for several minutes.

Then she walked away, not even stopping to listen to the servant's fearless denunciation of her as "a chittering, raving, rixy, louching, haggaging moil, an nor a bent th' worserer nar hot sh' art ter be, th' wapper-eed deave-nort.

Giggling akether!" shrieked the old woman, wild with resentment, "giggling akether! Lock! lock! *an her mon 'ud gie yit hare, an mek hare bodice pilmee an I wert 'un!"

Notwithstanding her wrath, she noticed that the young mother had gone off all by herself. Then, in spite of the lamentable despoilment she had undergone, and the vexation amounting to despair which she felt over it, a sudden idea came into her head that she would take the longed-for opportunity to go up and nurse the baby. She had never been allowed to touch it once, since the three first hours of its existence. The door was locked nor could she open it. Nothing was visible through the keyhole and she had to come downstairs again. Disappointed in this purpose and not daring to leave the house and procure assistance, lest the thieves should come back in her absence, she went out into the yard again and prepared to "wash up" in a mental condition more easily imagined than described. There, however, some vague consolation awaited her, for in winding up the well-rope to obtain the necessary fluid, she discovered the gallant lord of the henry seated on the floating bucket at the bottom. Out of the well she dragged him in triumph, as he saluted her with a melancholy flap of his wet wings and a feeble crow. He was in a truly despondent condition, though his dripping feathers grew less ruffled on discovering his safety. The bird had, while escaping the rough hands of its captors, fallen through the door in its fright and fortunately alighted on the bucket.

In the meanwhile, Dolores walked rapidly down the road over the plank which spanned the river and out on to the

* "Wouldn't her man give it her, and dust her bodice were I he!"

wild patch of common where the gipsies had been. They were all gone. The twigs twisted round the posts had all been brushed away by the renewed efforts of the cattle to get rid of their flies ; the ground was blackened and scathed by the remnants of fires, and strewn with tell-tale feathers. She was not very long, however, in discerning a couple of twigs laid crosswise on the ground, so that the longest stem pointed due south, and in that direction she hastened. The moorland around her grew wilder and wilder, the deep arid heather was purple with blossom, the sky was a sultry cloudless blue, and the atmosphere seemed quivering with the heat of the sun. Still she walked quickly, and at last she began even to run, for down in a deep ravine right in front she saw a desultory string of men, women, and children, winding along. Some of these vagrants were seated on small shaggy-looking ponies ; the women walked and carried burdens, as is ordained by the eternal fitness of things, while the men rode.

A slight breath of wind which blew past her in their direction enabled some word she cried out to be heard by them, and they all stopped waiting for her with evident marks of surprise. They were a strange and sinister party of people who clustered round her ; wild and ferocious in manner, and still wilder in speech, to judge from the way they cried out as she spoke to them. She tarried talking energetically with them for at least half an hour, and at last they separated. Every man, woman, and child, in the party bestowed a kiss upon her brow as they parted—all made some peculiar sign with the fingers of the right hand, which she satisfactorily answered.

Then the gipsies defiled off again, while Dolores hastened

home with astonishing celerity. She had traversed nearly five miles in three quarters of an hour: if the reader knew the difficulty of walking over these moorlands, he would appreciate her pedestrian powers.

Presently she was carrying her baby about, singing over it as if nothing had happened. Once as she passed the back door she burst into a second irrepressible fit of laughter, which did not pass unnoticed by the custodian of the stolen fowls.

That same evening after securing the house, Margery slept very uneasily; she constantly got up and wandered over the basement. At last she heard a faint stir outside, and, listening at the closed shutter, she made out the stealthy intonation which low whispering creates. She uttered a cry which she would doubtless have resumed in a shriller key, but in an instant her voice was drowned by a still wilder yell from outside. Every sound ever uttered in a poultry-yard since the first seven days in which the world began seemed comprised and concentrated in that one prolonged synchronous outcry. It lasted for fully a minute, then it broke away into desultory and individual screams which transcend description. It seemed as if a whole farm-yard of fowls had been suddenly released from a bag, which had hitherto smothered their remonstrances. As if wilfully to add to the confusion, her own cock, which she had carefully secured for the night in a cupboard, began to crow as if his life depended upon his exertions. Above all these conflicting sounds rose a human voice, which shouted some incomprehensible word, three times over.

To Margery's unspeakable horror this sound was answered by a loud cry apparently in the same language from the

dark corridor behind her. Staring round tremblingly, she saw a pair of eyes which gleamed with the dim reflections that streamed through the round holes in the shutters. The voice belonged to her mistress—the eyes were hers also.

Then everything outside grew quiet save the wild screaming of the fowls, who were occasionally assisted by the cock inside the cupboard. Nothing more sepulchral can be imagined than the hollow crowing of this spirited animal as it resounded out of the gloomy recess in the little stone scullery. Margery herself now commenced adding her voice to the confusion with redoubled vigour; any stranger who had been passing would have shuddered at the horrible and mysterious tumult. Dolores stood in the passage laughing like a spectator at a comedy till she leant against the panel for support. Presently even little Helen commenced giving *her* voice to the chorus, and the mother ran upstairs and began singing her child to sleep. Her sweet voice was a pathetic ending to all this wild confusion; it was as though a whirlwind had ended suddenly by modulating the strains of an *Æolian* harp. Indeed her voice might be said to have very much resembled the sound of a stringed instrument, for no words seemed audible in it to an ordinary ear.

The fowls outside left off their hysterical shrieks; the valiant cock no longer crowed, but contented himself by flapping his wings and scraping violently with his claws on the door of his reverberating prison. The hens in the yard must have been flung down into their house, for in a short while they apparently found out the roosting-hut and crowded into it. Then after a short consultation (in which

one old hen with a particularly strident voice distinguished herself in the manner of her sex by obstinately argumentative discourse) they resigned themselves to the roosting pegs. Then everything grew silent.

Now to any one who really understood what was taking place, these different noises would have explained themselves easily enough ; but to Margery they were inexplicable. She had no light and she dared not leave the room, but she groped about for a chair in the darkness. At last she found one and sat down on it. She must have remained there nearly an hour, till at last she began to doze ; her muttered exclamations subsided into detached sentences, like “Th’ Lord ha’ marcy aboo we—sh’s th’witch o’ Yender hersel,” and others of the same nature.

“Th’ Lord be righteous !” she cried suddenly, *“hot’s loostering-miching rouze th’ darn naw !”

At the same moment some one roused her by tapping loudly on the door-post.

“Unbar the door, Margery ! How long’s she going to keep me out in the rain ? Devil take the old hag !”

Again the knocking was repeated more loudly than before. Thoroughly awakened, she stood up and heard the rain beating dismally on the stones and against the shutters.

“Hot’s that I zay ?” she screamed, though she knew the voice well.

“I—Serpleton ! What’s the door locked for ?”

“Lock ! Lock !” said Margery making an unconscious pun.

“Am I to stand here in the wet all night while you stand mocking me ?” shouted the man outside.

* “What’s lurking round the door-posts now ?”

"Hot's I ter dew?" said Margery inside, communing aloud with herself in the extremity of her bewilderment.

At last she was persuaded to lay open her defences, and her master walked past in the dark, shaking the rain off his riding cloak, for outside it was pouring. A faint reflection fell into the darkened room through the open doorway.

One of the Cranberry farm-boys could be heard leading the horse back ; the boy's hob-nailed boots and the horse's iron-shod hoofs clattered over the rough stones. A lantern flashed through the rain at the door ; which Margery slammed with such vehemence in the clown's face, as he stood there (perhaps expecting a gratuity), that the startled horse ran off at a full gallop.

"Get tha gone out on't, tha gurt guttling gor-bellied mazy-jack!" she observed acrimoniously ; for she was only too glad to find some one on whom she might vent her spleen in safety, though the relief she felt at this sudden reinforcement was indescribable.

Then they were quite in the dark.

But presently Jeffery's wife came down the staircase at the sound of his voice, carrying a lighted candlestick, and with her baby on her arm. The yellow flickering light fell upon its little face, in which even now a promise of future health and beauty was visible. Its mouth was clasping her bosom, and its little tender hands were seen pushing out energetically, just in the way one sometimes notices a suckled kitten forcing a larger supply of nutriment with its fore-paws. The mother had risen in her night-gown.

As might be expected, Serpleton's first attentions were paid to her. He flung his wet cloak to the ground and

clasped both mother and child up together in his strong arms.

Margery looked on shivering with cold, but prepared every moment to begin her talk. She looked a strange figure in the dim half-light; her wrinkled face shadowed by an enormous frilled night-cap, and her body enveloped in a loose flannel gown. Her feet, being inserted into her cold clogs, eluded the polluting touches of the black-beetles which could be seen escaping madly over the floor in all directions. At her girdle hung a bunch of rusty keys, which jangled together as she moved.

"Well, Margery, we'll be going to-morrow night. My wife won't trouble you any more. My brother Oliver Serpleton the curate of Matyard Torin will live here in future with *his* wife. You'll find them very kind people, and you are to be the only servant they'll have, unless they bring some help with them; no children to fluster you, Mrs. Wilmot."

Jeffery always said "Mrs. Wilmot" when he wished to conciliate her. Then he added under his breath, "But I don't think they'll be very long without them."

"Lock! Lock!" said Margery. This was always an expression of dissatisfaction with her, but she was far too upset to offer the strenuous list of objections she otherwise would have invented. I may as well take the opportunity of observing that she disliked Oliver's wife thoroughly.

Serpleton noticed there was something the matter with her, for he looked sharply in her face and muttered, "What the devil's the matter with the old woman?"

Then he asked the same question of his wife, in Spanish,

inquiring moreover whether *she* had done anything to annoy the old servant.

“Quien sabe?”

The girl evidently did not wish her husband to learn more than was possible of the night’s doings—or more likely of the part she herself had played in them—for she went up as if she would caress or cajole Margery. She even cunningly tried to make her hold the baby.

But all blandishments proved unavailing; the old woman saw through the insidious flattery of the young one. Waving her aside with an indignant gesture, she began pouring forth the story of her wrongs, until her master’s brain grew perfectly bewildered in the intricacies of the dialect he had not heard for so many years. He tried vainly to comprehend what she said, but in a while, as her throat got exhausted, she had to speak slower and grew less incoherent. It would be an impossibility to write down all the countrywoman’s strange colloquialisms.

At last the whole story was explained—how “thae gipsy devils” had stolen the fowls for the second time within twenty years; and how “thicka witch o’ Yender” had “girned” at the misfortune; and refused to render any assistance! She refused to give any sign of consolation, though she perfectly understood what had happened, and she (Margery) had not dared to leave the house all day, while no one had come near to help her. I doubt if even Margery herself could have recognised her own description of what had happened just before her listener’s arrival, so formidable did its dimensions grow under her breathless manipulation. Serleton frowned visibly as he heard of the truly diabolical manner in which the gipsies had cried

out (for Margery in her terror had set down the solitary human shout and the cackling of the fowls all to one common cause) and the way his wife had laughingly answered them. Dolores looked on guiltily, but with defiant eyes as though she knew what their speech was about by the expression of their faces. The only unconcerned person present seemed to be Helen, the undeveloped heroine of this story ; but even *she* expressed considerable dissatisfaction, as a sudden movement on her mother's part drew the breast out of her widely-opened mouth, and left it gaping as with astonishment.

Serpleton turned from the housekeeper, and began addressing his wife in an angry tone, while she retorted in much the same fashion. Both grew very irate ; the Spaniard's resentful nature was roused, and in an instant a violent altercation had sprung up between them. At last the girl's eyes sparkled with anger like a snake's, and she rushed out of the room in the dark, and upstairs to the top of the house ; there she locked herself and her baby up in a garret.

This is by no means unusual conduct even with more civilised young ladies ; therefore we must not be too hard on the instinct which led Dolores to follow the custom of her sex.

Jeffery was in a great state of annoyance ; he seemed half inclined to vent it on Margery herself as she stood looking on with astonishment at the sudden outburst of conjugal discord which her complaints had awakened.

Before a word was spoken, a door slammed violently overhead ; then the faint cackling of a disturbed hen attracted their attention.

"Why, Margery, what the devil do you mean by this long rigmarole? There *are* your hens!"

Both listened, and the same mysterious noise became audible again.

Then Serpleton took up the candle and went to the door; the wet stones gleamed fitfully in the light, but the rain had ceased. The wind blew the flame out, while he tried to shelter it with his hand; then they had to strike a fresh one with the tinder-box. This time Margery brought an old horn-lantern, and with it they both went out into the yard. The fowl-house was quite silent, but as they opened the door of the hut, the clanking of the large keys produced a perfect scream of consternation from within. The inmates all fluttered down from the perches flapping their wings wildly, and crowded one after another into the little enclosed space in front, each screaming in some different key.

The old woman raised her hands and stared on them with astonishment; the expression of her face would have formed a study for Hogarth. The fowls were certainly there; but they were not *hers*.

The gipsies had stolen somebody else's fowls to repay her with!

* * * * *

About three o'clock in the morning, just as the daylight appeared in the sky, Serpleton (by dint of much persuasive eloquence whispered through the keyhole and the chinks of the door-posts, and by many promises to submit to not very dignified conditions) so far moved his wife's heart as to cause her to unlock the door and come forth from her

seclusion. Then the interior of the country house became quite quiet.

The next evening they both departed ; their saddle-horses waited for them beyond the ford ; the baby was well wrapped up in its mother's arms. One may imagine the satisfaction with which Margery watched their departure, although she still regretted the baby. A grimace over her shoulder, when Serleton's head happened to be turned away, was the last insult Dolores ever lived to bestow on the long-suffering if bad-tempered servant : Margery never saw either of them again.

CHAPTER II.

CLERICAL TRIBULATIONS.

“ BIDEFORD never to have sent burgesses to parliament ? It is most erroneous to suppose it to have been no more than a fishing-village in Elizabeth's reign, as the records prove ! Why, even in 1271, was not a Monday market and five days' fair at St. Margaret's Day granted to Richard de Grenville ? But... !” These were the weighty considerations which occupied the brain of the Rev. Oliver Serleton as he entered into and slowly wended his way down the straggling main street of Matyard-Torin ; a moorland village which lay in the hundred of Gowdhurst and deanery of Wakeham. The wretched appearance of the ill-built hovels and cottages between which he was passing is almost too painful to describe ; but they attracted very

little of the clerical attention, so absorbed was the scholar's whole mind in the speculations indicated above.

Indeed, so oblivious was the learned gentleman of all sublunary circumstances that, in no way heeding the earnest advice given by a disinterested but raggedly-clad village damsels, to "gae suently an measch shut on't, parson," he stepped right into the midst of a dirty puddle of water;—an institution as respected and venerable as the house in front of which it lay. Then he came to a confused stop, and stood gazing with great perplexity on the muddy and unexpected reflections of the sky in its agitated depths; while several pigs stood around him, grunting as though they selfishly resented his unwarranted intrusion into their most cherished haunt.

The ragged young woman, leaning with bare sun-browned shoulders against the decaying door-post, cannot be said to have expressed very great concern at the catastrophe she had tried vainly to prevent. She merely put her head inside the door, and called out to some one in the room,

"Th' parson's gaed stug* i' th' plid† agin, muthor,"—then she gave way to an irrepressible fit of mirthfulness.

"Ers stratted ‡ ter th' huxens §! Eh! come an' lack vor yersel," she screamed in a voice made inarticulate by her shrill and immodest laughter, as the unfortunate man waded at last out of the black water, and stood gazing dolefully on his dirty stockings and shoes.

Three sunburnt rough-looking women, with bare feet (all of them carrying unhealthy wizen-faced babies) came to the door and stood looking on. The aborigines of this favoured village did not seem in the habit of using soap

* Splash.

† Mud.

‡ Splashed.

§ Ankles.

and water very copiously, nor could shamefacedness be counted a prevailing characteristic among them, to judge from their apathetic countenances and bare limbs. The men were all away on the moors, with their crooks, gathering peat for the support of their half-starved families, but several women appeared at different doors. A whole herd of children attracted by a cry of “th’ parson! th’ parson!” streamed out, unabashed by their nakedness, into the narrow roadway which separated the poverty-stricken houses.

“Dear, dear me! I ought to have remembered! what will Leah say to me?” they all heard the poor clergyman exclaim in a tone of despair.

Their speech sounded so different from his that one would not have expected them to understand him; but the girl who had first addressed him shouted,

“Goe indel till hare an try, parson, nif tha dust!”*

“Goe indel, parson! Goe indel!” cried several others, “thalt forgie thy round-shavin, as tha didstlearst Zinday.”†

Quite unaware of the subtle sarcasm which underlay these pieces of advice (and indeed without being conscious that any one had spoken to him), the curate pulled out a clean pocket-handkerchief, and began trying to wipe the mud off his ankles. In an instant his handkerchief was perfectly black too, though he nowise achieved his purpose. His perplexity was extreme; at last he looked up, and his eyes fell on the uncouth forms of the women and children surrounding him. The clergyman’s mind was apparently filled with a most wholesome horror of this particular section of his parish-

* Go home to her and see, if you dare.

† You will forget your sermon as you did last Sunday.

ioners, for he gave an alarmed start, and uttered such a shrill exclamation, in his surprise, that it might have been taken for a shriek. Then he muttered something that would have sounded vaguely like "Good morning, good morning," had it been pronounced less hurriedly, and began to move away from them as though he wished to escape further persecution or annoyance. In his haste he dropped the handkerchief, which was instantly appropriated by the girl, who threw it impudently over her tawny uncombed locks; all black with mud as it was.

The mothers stood at the doors of their habitations, laughing still at his mishap, but he was followed out of the village and along the road by a band of their fearless urchins. These children seemed to have grown perfectly savage and desperate in the monotony of their wretched hungry little existences. They imitated his gestures, mocked him under the appellation of "Parson Mazy-Jack," and behaved with such general irreverence that, had he been aware of what was going on behind his back, he might have longed for the prophet Elisha's bears to appear and menace them with instant destruction. But only now and then the burden of a species of rhythmical chorus, in which they all joined, reached his ears, "Th' parson's stugged i' th' plid! Th' parson's stugged i' th' plid!" And hearing it he quickened his pace.

At length when this godless procession had gone about a quarter of a mile from the village, the whole band of children stopped in their wild career; then they turned and fled down the winding road, like a flock of frightened sheep. They were soon dispersed over the moors in all directions and no more seen.

Oliver, plodding on silently with his hands clasped behind him, and his looks directed to the ground, was suddenly arrested by some individual up against whom he walked ; he uttered a shrill exclamation as was invariably his wont when surprised, and perhaps was about to make some incoherent apology, when he discovered himself to be incapacitated for bodily exertion by the fact that this person's arms were clasping him round the neck.

“ Why, Oliver, don't you know me ? ” shouted a strident voice right in his ear. This unexpected sound roused him out of his reverie, but so startled him that he actually gave a slight jump ; as to realizing its meaning, he never dreamt of it.

He stood there in an indescribable condition of bewilderment, which was rather increased than otherwise by the person whose arms were round his neck giving him a slight shake. After two or three seconds it occurred to him to look in the man's face. Without his spectacles, however, he was too short-sighted to make out anything beyond a blank spot of white, a black patch which might have been a moustache, and the flash of a couple of eyes which seemed to be gazing intently all over him.

The poor clergyman's mind, withdrawn suddenly from a general contemplation of the age in which “ a Monday market on St. Margaret's Day had been granted to Richard de Grenville,” was perfectly incapable of recognizing in these rudimentary lineaments any face he had ever seen before. Meanwhile, the arms were withdrawn from his neck, and he felt his two hands grasped firmly.

A sudden idea shot across his acute brain. “ This man

is the bookseller from Exeter," he exclaimed (mentally as he thought, but in reality out loud). "Mr. Ferretem," he continued in the same key, "I will not . . . I mean I cannot settle my account just now. You assented to my proposition with regard to delay, I believe, although you did not send me the works I required. Without Tusser (which I desire to replace, it having been borrowed by a person whose name has escaped my memory), Ray, and Drayton, also the Records of Holcombe Burnel, I hardly know how to proceed. But I cannot speak to you now, as I am in a hurry."

Having said these words, this singular specimen of the Devonshire clergy seemed to desire to escape, but the man held him fast by the hands. Looking in his face with astonishment, Oliver Serpleton still dimly saw the bright eyes glancing all over him.

"Why, Oliver, Oliver, can't you recognize your own brother? I'm not Ferretem the bookseller. You wore spectacles when I saw you last; put them on and look at me."

The clergyman stared at this address. He did however, after feeling in two or three pockets without effect, and at last finding them pushed up on his brow and hidden by the flap of his hat, produce a pair which he fixed on his nose.

"Why . . . you . . . must . . . yes . . . you undoubtedly are my brother Jeffery!"

"Who should I be?"

"I have no conception," said Oliver curtly, "if you are not." He added, "But you say you are."

"I said so."

"You remind me of a great many painful impressions which I considered myself to have finally lost," exclaimed Oliver, "but I have some remembrance now of having heard that you had come back and with a . . . a . . ."

"With a *what*?"

"My wife said a . . . a . . ."

"A wife, Oliver?"

"No . . . no . . . not exactly; but I do not desire to offend . . ."

"Ah, ah! I suppose you disapprove of a heathen sister-in-law, eh, Noll? What sort of a clergyman do you make?"

"Ah!" shrieked Oliver, suddenly roused into an involuntary volubility of speech which was astonishing for him, "I have no liking for my profession at all. I hate the name of the church I am compelled to officiate in . . . but what am I to do! I have nothing else but the . . ."

Here again he ceased speaking and looked uncomfortably at his brother, while two or three books fell down from some mysterious recess under his coat. The title-page of a great volume of the enlightened Spinoza lay open on the ground while the small volume entitled "Candide ou L'Optimisme" seemed hardly that which a minister of the Church should be found in possession of; but he was in the habit of placing books under his arm and then forgetting them.

Meanwhile, the prodigal "blind-blossom," and the philosophical clergyman looked at each other in silence, as they stood in the midst of the wild heath, now bright with the autumn flowers. To give Oliver his due, I think I am right in saying that he had quite forgotten the borough of

Bideford and all it contained. Such attention as he was capable of mastering in an emergency was certainly concentrated on his brother.

“ Well, Noll, do you always go about with a train of attendants like that at your heels ? ” said Jeffery at last, pointing to a couple of children who still remained in sight. These urchins immediately dived down into the purple heather as they saw his outstretched hand.

Oliver made no reply, but stood awkwardly in the middle of the road and gazed intently on the distant clouds, while his brother stared on him with amazement.

“ Why, Noll, you weren’t so muddle-headed as this when I saw you last ; were you ? ”

“ I am very unpopular among the parishioners,” said Oliver at length, indirectly alluding to the first question and without listening to the second. “ I fear I am but little fitted for sociability, for I am immersed in my own studies usually. I neither understand nor sympathise with them, nor do they with me, and they do not respect me in consequence. My duties are a great burden upon me, though, at present, I see little chance of avoiding them. Sometimes they call me out at midnight. Two nights ago I was called out to visit a dying woman in this village, who said she had strangled, I think, one of her children in youth, and I could scarce think what to say in reply.”

“ Well, they don’t seem to respect you, and I don’t wonder at . . . But what are those strings dangling about you ? ”

“ Oh dear, dear ! my coat is undone. Leah always puts strings instead of buttons, for she tells me I can’t pull them off or loose them,” said Oliver ; “ but then,” he con-

tinued in a tone of deep meditation, "they get tied into knots, and I have to ask Jenny Gadaround—"

"What?"

"Eh . . . Did . . . you . . . speak . . . Jeffery?"

"Yes, I did, but never mind. Who may Jenny Gadaround be?"

"Eh! Oh! Yes! my wife's servant," answered Oliver, whose voice had by this time subsided into a timid whisper.

"I found out your house, and went first to that and found your wife indoors. She seemed rather shocked when she found out who I was, for I suppose I've rather an evil reputation. But I stopped a long while talking with her, and she told me all about your embarrassments."

"Ah, yes! I have many embarrassments," said the ill-paid curate, pulling at the strings.

"She consented to live at Watern Tor when I and my 'companion' were gone, she said; so now the house belongs to you both. You have no necessity to be a clergyman any longer if you don't wish it."

"Ay! what do you mean?" and Oliver again gave a little cry of astonishment.

"Never mind now, your wife will tell you."

The Rev. Oliver Serpleton was completely mystified, but he said not a word, save that he muttered something and put his hand up to his forehead.

"Shall—I—be—able—to pursue my studies there in *absolute* seclusion?" he asked suddenly.

"If you wish it."

"Then I will go immediately;" and Oliver looked round him as though he would start off forthwith.

" Pick up your books first. Stay, I'll do it. Hold them tight. Won't they drop again ? "

" N—no, I think—I trust not."

" Won't you take your wife with you ? "

" I am going home to her now."

" Well, you don't ask me to go with you, but it so happens that I can't,—I'm going home myself. I was unwilling to leave here without seeing you after so many years; I had a great deal of trouble to find where you lived, as it was, and your wife told me where I should find you out here. But I see you're not listening to me. Well, I'll come some day and see you at Serleton House before long, but at present I have very pressing business in London; I must get home, and start to-morrow evening. Good-bye, Nolly, good-bye." So saying, Jeffery wrung his brother's hands, and walked off up the road without looking behind him.

Oliver began to walk back on the road towards the village; he had gone about a hundred yards when he turned round and said, " Good morning, good morning, Jeffery." But Jeffery was no longer beside him; and, ascertaining this important fact, he turned round and plodded on as before.

Gradually his head sank on his breast, and his hands clasped themselves behind his back; the volumes under his arm protruded through his black cloth coat like shoulder blades, and his spectacles slipped lower and lower down the ridge of his nose till it seemed a miracle they did not fall off altogether. This time, however, he wisely avoided the pond, and got through the street without any observation, save that of the pigs who lay about it. Apparently

he mistook the indolent grunting of one of these animals for the voice of some Matyard-Torin parishioner, for in passing he lifted his hat off his head and exclaimed curtly, "I've no time to stop now,—no time, no time," while he walked faster than ever.

At last he reached the outskirts of Gowdhurst, which lay hidden on the other side of a hill some half mile from Matyard; coming to a thatched cottage near the village church, he recognised it as his place of residence and entered the door. There in the passage he found his wife standing. I have been told that she was about that time a thin spare woman, aged twenty-nine, with a face which expressed much sweetness of disposition, in spite of the careworn look which seemed to be slowly invading the features. A hectic red spot on each cheek showed her to be in delicate health. Two of her children were dead; she had only just resigned her mourning in consideration of the fact that she soon expected to become the mother of a third.

Mrs. Serpleton had become acquainted with so many rumours, each one vaguer and wilder than the last, concerning Jeffery's past and present conduct, that his sudden entrance had caused her to turn pale. She was still scared and frightened as she advanced to meet her husband and ask him if he had met any one.

"Eh?"

"Have you met any one?"

"Yes, I think— Oh, yes! Jeffery, Jeffery. We must immediately go to Watern Tor."

"Yes, dear, he told me; but we cannot go immediately."

"We *must*," replied Oliver curtly.

"Where did you meet your brother?"

“Eh?”

“Oh dear me! I wish you would attend to me.”

“Yes, my dear, I will,” replied the curate meekly.

“Your brother came here to-day and rather startled me. I know you want all your time for yourself, and I told him about all our affairs; then he said he intended to allow you—or rather to settle upon you—four hundred pounds a year, and to give you Serleton House in which you were born. This is a very large income for us, after all we have gone through, Nolly; but are you aware of what I’m saying?”

“No, I think—at least I—You know, I believe I met Ferretem to-day.”

“Well, you can pay his bill now, thank God! But *do* listen to me.”

“Dear me! but now I think of it he was not—I mean he was my broth—Yes, Leah, I am attending to you; pray go on.”

“We shall both be very glad to leave this district.”

“I shall have no more sermons to write,” exclaimed Oliver joyfully.

“Nay, I know that; but you cannot leave here before next Sunday.”

“I *will*.”

“Well, my dear, to-day is Thursday, and I am hardly in a condition to make many arrangements myself.”

“Why not?”

“You know, Nolly.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, never mind at present; will you allow your books to be tied up?”

"Books *must* be packed up during removal, I suppose; inconveniences must be inevitably endured at such times," said the curate with extreme gravity, if not sententiousness.

"Old Roger Moreman shall take them in his market cart, but it's a long way; what little furniture we have can also go. But all your instruments?"

"They *must* go in the cart."

"If any are broken?"

"Instruments *will* get broken. Did you say we had any money?"

"Yes."

"Then buy new ones."

"They aren't broken yet, dear."

"Eh! why did you say they were?"

"Oh dear me! Do go up to your work now and don't bother any more."

"Yes, my dear, I will," said the obedient Oliver, and he was just proceeding up the passage from the front door, when his wife cried out,

"Good Heavens, Nolly! where have you been to? Look at your stockings! Where *have* you been?"

"I don't remember," said Oliver; a statement which was not strictly veracious, but he did not wish to plead guilty to a crime he had committed time after time before, and had grown rather ashamed of.

"Have you been through Matyard?" she asked.

"I—I—I think I have," he replied with unsuspecting innocence.

"Then, you stepped into the pond?"

"I think I—yes; Oh yes, I did—now I think of it," re-

marked the guileless curate, discomfited by this subtle and unexpected display of feminine logic.

“ Sit down on the stairs instantly, and wait till I come back again.”

With this he complied immediately; presently his wife appeared with a clean pair of stockings and an old pair of leather slippers. “ Now go into your room, dear, and stop there a little while, and I will see what is to be done. Don’t go out again.”

Just as, in compliance with this request, he was about to enter the door of his study at the head of the staircase, he turned round and said gravely, “ I think I remember now why you mentioned that we would not be able to go at present.”

But there was nobody to hear him, and he went into his room and closed the door.

CHAPTER III.

FOR BETTER FOR WORSE.

ON Sunday morning the usual gathering took place in Gowdhurst churchyard; the doors were opened and the congregation streamed in to take their seats. The usual leonine frowns and black looks were bestowed by indignant Christians on such unfortunate brothers and sisters as had managed to get into the wrong pews; the customary suppressed scuffling and coughing took place. The beadle, finding a small unowned boy playing surreptitiously at

“nevie-nevie-nick-nack” (with marbles), hurried the offender out of the sacred precincts and into the churchyard, whence a direful wail, like the cry of an Irish banshee, swept through the aisle among the pillars; then the beadle with his staff reappeared, and silence fell upon the awe-stricken assembly. It was not thought very astonishing that a man so irregular and eccentric as the curate was known to be should not appear in exact time to commence the service; but when, after three-quarters of an hour, it was announced by the sexton that he had just discovered Mr. Serpleton to have left the neighbourhood, considerable dissatisfaction was expressed on all sides. Some members of the congregation came from a long distance—some riding, some walking; but now all they could do would be to return home again. Old apoplectic farmers missed the nap they indulged in to recruit their strength between the two journeys, and lost their tempers accordingly; their ladies were deprived of the exultation of further exhibiting their fine bonnets and shawls, to the confusion and dismay of neighbours less successful in harvest-tide than themselves. One old gentleman (the Squire) had at once fallen asleep, as his wont was, in his cushioned and curtained pew; some difficulty was experienced by his daughter in convincing him that he must wake up and go home. Every one was inclined to comment severely on this last freak of poor Oliver’s; only the faces of the different children accompanying their parents grew brighter and brighter as no minister appeared in the gloomy pulpit, and it became more and more apparent that there was to be no “sarment” that day. At last they all went home and the church was deserted.

Subsequent inquiry elicited the fact that old Roger Moreman, the carrier, had departed with a waggon, said to contain not only all the scanty clerical furniture, but all Oliver's books and philosophical apparatus as well. He (Roger) would be gone for five days. Mrs. Moreman was deaf, and she also had no teeth to speak of; this made the communication of these details a tedious and difficult matter. Having spoken thus far, the good old lady mumbled and shook her head alternately, but not a word more would she utter, save that she incidentally mentioned how her favourite son "Tokey" had been drowned at sea; to whose immersion she, by a slight confusion of the philosophic principles of cause and effect, attributed the fact of her having suffered cruelly from the "bone-shave"/* ever since. It seemed almost as though there was some propensity in Mrs. Moreman's reticence with regard to the movements of her spouse, she being often more full of information on other occasions than her listeners required. It at last became known that Oliver, his wife Leah, and the handmaiden Jenny Gadaround, had mounted the coach which passed the "Loblolly Inn," and had departed after their furniture on Saturday evening. They reached Okehampton the next night, it was said; then on Monday morning they hired horses to carry them to Watern Tor.

When the Reverend Oliver Serpleton found himself on horseback, he is reported to have ejaculated, "I remember—to have ridden in my youth; but, now I think, I recollect, Leah, that it was not a very favourite occupa-

* Sciatica.

tion with me,—for—I always fell off—into muddy ditches—or prickly furze bushes. I undoubtedly remember so.” Then they departed with a guide to lead them over the moor.

What the vicar said of this abrupt behaviour I have no means of ascertaining; I only know that he is said to have expressed much annoyance, for it was a troublesome problem to get another curate so utterly trodden down by ill fortune as to accept the pastorship of the unruly sheepfold of Matyard-Torin and its neighbouring villages. However, he wrote an explanatory letter to the bishop at Exeter, and the bishop wrote back to say that never in the memory of man had a more irregular or, he might even say, disreputable proceeding occurred throughout the [] parishes of his diocese. He also intimated that he had reason to believe that Oliver’s religious opinions were not quite so orthodox and godly as they should be.

CHAPTER IV.

SEQUEL.

OLIVER SERPLETON was immersed in silence and meditation; his pony might have carried him wheresoever it wished, and would have done so had it not been for the assistance of Leah, who rode next to him. The untiring affection she bore for her eccentric husband was more than once manifested by the way in which she warned him

with unavailing words, or occasionally offered more material interference by leaning over and seizing his reins as they neared the gravel pits and quagmires which intersected the devious moorland paths they were traversing. Jenny was close behind ; the man who acted as guide walked or ran in front to make sure of the firmness of the boggy soil. Whenever the holes made by the pole he tested it with filled up with water, he informed the party they were on dangerous ground, and they had to proceed with great caution ; at intervals they came to the margins of rapid brawling streams, and the sure-footed little ponies stepped skilfully over the mossy stones the channels were choked up with. Now and then the path led them between huge cloven rocks, the summits and sides of which seemed every moment about to be dislodged by the high wind which swept in their faces, scented with heather as a sea-wind is with brine.

At last they came to a wide plain, the purple heathery undulations of which seemed bounded only by the horizon. The long-unused path they had been following here seemed to cease, for it was all overgrown by the quick-springing moorland vegetation ; in one place, however, the point of a high "tor" rose dimly against the distant grey sky. This, the guide informed them, was Strammel Linsherd, a landmark towards which they now had to direct their ponies.

"Lock-a-daisy, mistress ! look up at th' pil'm* yonder. Es chudd'nt be a wafron,"† said the maid abruptly.

"Dang ma stears ! thicker baint briss,‡ it's a seat o' reek,"§ exclaimed the moorsman pausing.

* Dust.

† Cloud.

‡ Dust.

§ Clot of mist.

“ Why, I can’t see the rock you spoke of any longer ; where can the cloud come from, for the wind’s blowing against it ? ”

“ Dang ma buttons nif a knaw, ma leddy ; but a daunt want un ter cume pliming* ron ye about here,” answered the gallant Dartmoor native, scratching his head after the manner of his kind when in perplexity, and looking alarmed.

The whole cavalcade came to an abrupt stop on the summit of an undulation where the horses stood knee-deep in the heather blossom. Oliver’s attention was perhaps arrested by the unexpected cessation of movement, for he looked up suddenly and appeared to be very much startled at finding himself where he was. Preserving the most perfect equanimity, however, he contented himself with an observation to the effect that they would soon be there, and sat on his pony calmly beside his wife, who, for her part, gazed anxiously on the small nucleus of mist which had arisen round the rock that served them as a landmark. The ominous-looking vapour seemed rising everywhere ; it was advancing towards them over the moorland more swiftly than the shadow of a wind-driven cloud. Meanwhile the sun overhead was veiled, and their own shadows faded away off the heather ; every indication which Nature is capable of giving, showed that a Dartmoor fog was coming on. It might settle down and last for a week : how to escape from it they none of them seemed to know. “ Eh, thin, we’ll a’ ketch yower deaths o’ cauld in’t ! ” screamed the courageous Jenny in a thoroughly

* Expanding.

alarmed condition, while her mistress exclaimed, "Dear, dear me! can't we go back again?"

"Nay, that'll be a' round usel's avore us choud strike th' drangway agin," answered the phlegmatic guide.

"Well, what *are* we to do?—we shall lose our way!"

"Th' Lord ha'e mercy upon us!" remarked Jenny fervently.

"What's the matter, my dear,—what's the matter?" asked the clergyman looking up and rather alarmed, possibly because these words reminded him of some part of the service it had once been his duty to conduct.

"The mist, the mist!" and Leah motioned her thin hand towards the horizon.

"Th' reek, th' reek!" cried Jenny from the other side of his horse, in corroboration.

"But I don't think I see any," he rejoined after a while.

"You've lost your spectacles; but be quiet for a moment. What are we to do,—can you not lead us through?" continued the lady addressing the astute Devonian again.

"Naw, a' bain't able tew; naw-a-man choud!" answered the man as though amazed at her simplicity.

"But what are we to do?"

"Wot be us ter dew, tha gurt flabagastered mum-chance?" screamed Jenny the shrill-voiced, sustaining the cross-examination in a key somewhat unnecessarily high.

"Be quiet, Jenny," interposed Mrs. Serpleton.

"Wall," drawled the guide, finding his tongue at last, "we'd dew best ter palch* along ter th' trend† i' th'

* Run.

† Stream.

holler hinder,* che'll take gude tent o' tha'. Tha ne'dst na lewstry i' thecke falshion,—a didn't mek' th' reek mysel."

So saying, he set off again ; and, by following him some quarter of a mile, they all at last came to the bank of a small rivulet. Before they reached it, however, they were enveloped in a fog so dense that they could hardly see ten yards ahead. Oliver very urbanely remarked that "it would be difficult to proceed under the present circumstances," while the dismayed Jenny wrung her hands, lifted up her voice, and bewailed her fate aloud, being "only twenty-one," as she observed, until in a sudden outburst of conscience and rectitude, she admitted being "twenty-yeaght January agone." At last Mrs. Serpleton exclaimed sternly, though in a faint voice, "I insist upon your being quiet, Jenny!" whereupon the timorous hand-maiden observing "that it was cruel rough upon sae young a body," subsided into a whimpering silence.

"Chave un! Chave un! Jet gae on now reart an tha whult," shouted the fellow in front with an accent of triumph ; being translated freely, this speech means, "I have found a way, we can proceed along if you wish it."

It was a very rough way, however, for it lay along the rocky bank of a stream called the _____. The wiry-limbed indefatigable little moorland ponies scrambled from stone to stone as best they might, and the unusual jolting soon roused the late incumbent of Matyard-Torin to a most undesirable consciousness of his personal position ; while his wife complained to her faithful attendant that

* Yonder.

she suffered from a severe headache. Jenny was, however, too engrossed in her own woes to sympathize with those of her mistress; at every movement of her pony she uttered a shrill scream, but nothing more would she say.

Their garments were soon drenched with damp, and the cold was so intense that their fingers got almost too benumbed to hold the reins. The hardy little peasant who led them never ceased his exertions; his strange encouraging cries to the horses could be heard repeatedly. Every now and then they came to places so precarious that the riders had to dismount, while he took the patient beasts over by themselves. Once, just as Mrs Serleton had dismounted for the fourth or fifth time, the treacherous earth broke away so that her pony rolled over into the stream, while she only saved herself by springing backward. In a few moments, with a little aid, it had managed to climb out again; when the frightened animal was sufficiently pacified, she had to remount the saddle all wet as it was. They were passing through a most distressing experience of the discomfort of moorland travelling such as it was in those days; no one can imagine what a Dartmoor fog was before the roads were made, although it is unpleasant enough to be overtaken by one now. Mrs. Serleton was growing more and more fatigued every minute.

The clergyman still kept perfectly silent, save that once the figure of Vragwell—so the guide was named—attracted his hazy attention; whenever the man went any little distance ahead of them, the mist caused his body to grow so dim and grey in colour as to seem a mile away, while his stature remained unaltered. In

consequence of this, a singular optical delusion occurred, for the more he receded the larger he seemed to grow; as he approached them again and the outlines of his form grew more defined, he seemed once more to decrease to his natural size,—that is to say, from ten feet to about four feet nine.

It is a remarkable thing that Oliver should have noticed this at all; but he was, when not otherwise pre-occupied, a most accurate observer of Nature. Once or twice he had quite taken various honest people by surprise with his caustic and unexpected remarks on things that were going on round them; they, in consequence, ever afterwards believing that his absent-mindedness and inattention were all assumed in order to escape trouble from them.

However, Oliver began solemnly explaining the atmospheric laws on which this circumstance was based, and doubtless would have proved remarkably edifying if any of the party had troubled themselves to listen; but his wife was too exhausted to hear him, while Jenny was too frightened; and presently, having said all he desired on the subject, he subsided into his habitual speechlessness.

In order that I may not appear to have an insufficient grasp over details (trivial in themselves, but which may prove highly conducive towards supporting the veracity of this history), I must here diverge for an instant to explain how the uncle of my future heroine was able to see these things, his wife having not long ago alluded to the loss of his spectacles. It appears, on inquiry, that these instrumental aids to vision had merely been displaced and

pushed up on his forehead, but now, owing to some movement of his brows, or—more likely—from a severer jolting than usual on his pony's part, they had fallen on to his nose again, although the fact that everything capable of being seen in the fog had become mysteriously visible to him in nowise attracted his enlightened attention.

At last, after travelling about two hours in this wretched fashion, they found they had reached what the little guide asserted to be “th' lewside” of Strammel Linsherd. The great rocks loomed up before their faces, though the highest crags were lost in the mist. They had now to make a *détour*, for it was no longer possible to follow the course of the river, which precipitated itself over the huge stones in its channel in a series of cataracts, while the banks were steep and impassable. Mr. Vragwell undauntedly declared he could now find his way without it, having once again come in sight of the landmark he had lost. The fog was getting thin all round them; they were evidently reaching its outskirts. At last they emerged on to the road I have in a previous chapter described as joining the high-road to Okehampton; there they were safe, and Jenny recovered her self-possession well enough to perceive that her mistress was almost too ill to sit on her pony.

The wild-looking little animals cantered along rapidly; they passed the ford, and were soon in front of Serpleton House. They had set out early in the morning, and it was late in the afternoon when they arrived. Margery, who had not yet expected them, received the party at the gate with astonishment, but uttered a still greater exclama-

mation of surprise when she saw how white and ill Mrs. Serpleton looked. Jenny and she had to help the lady from her saddle, for she fainted and fell off in their arms ; she was conveyed into the house by them, and the guide was sent for a doctor.

Oliver was rather taken aback by this strange conduct on his wife's part, and had tried vainly to assist her, but he was hustled into a room by himself, and was told to wait there as his wife was ill. He had not the vaguest idea what was about to happen, and, being in all matters of personal authority a mere species of elderly child, utterly under the dominion of any one who chose to assume it over him, he naturally did as he was told ; he remained as quiet as a church mouse when the organ is being experimented on. In about an hour, from the noise and bustle overhead, he might have guessed that some fresh arrival had taken place in the house, for a horse galloped up to the door, and a man's voice was heard giving some directions in a gruff tone, and two or three people were going up and down stairs. But the clergyman was very tired, and merely supposed Leah to have gone to bed ; he was, besides, immersed in the quaint thumb-marked pages of Margery's "vinegar" Bible, on which he had pounced like a hawk on a young chicken. At last it grew dark and he had to cease reading, till—about nine o'clock—discovering the cause of his inability, he got up and resolved to ask for his wife and also for a candle ; he also meditated very profoundly as to whether he was hungry or not.

Just as he got into the little dark passage and had knocked his knees on the wainscot of the wall opposite his door, a wailing cry rose, then ceased, but began again :

each time it increased in intensity, though it was but a pitiful little moan at the best.

I cannot say what it was that roused him, but he ran straight through the basement at random, and, finding Margery in the back kitchen, seized her by the shoulders; after gasping for breath two or three minutes, he managed to find the right words with which to inquire what was the matter,—why he had been told not to go near his wife?

“Daun’t ast ma,—a’ reck’n th’ ould house be begayged.* Who’d a’ thought it, eh? Dest hire un?” and the old woman made him listen. “Tha mussn’t goa yup th’ bal-lusters.”

“Why—you—can’t—mean—to—say—”

“A daunt mearn ter say nuthin’. Yer wife’s i’ the groan. Thomasin an’ th’ doctor’s beed zent for, an’ their up wi’ hare. I never had sichuna day i’ ma loife. Eh hire un,” she muttered, as the desolate querulous little cry rose again.

“Why wasn’t I told of this?” the curate said angrily, almost shaking the old woman in his agitation; then he hurried out on to the staircase.

There he found Jenny,—indeed, he nearly fell over her, for she was sitting wringing her hands and weeping, she having also been ejected from the room above. A very singular scene took place here, for the frightened girl seized firmly hold of poor Oliver’s ankles, and, in his frantic struggles to disengage himself, they both rolled down the stairs together on to the tiles of the passage. Margery came out with a rushlight and had to assist her

* Bewitched.

foster-son on to his feet again ; the old woman asked sternly “if it was a taly moment for sich a quandary* as thact ?” while Jenny went into a fresh burst of tears and asserted her heart to be “galvaing† like a blowmanger.”

Oliver began to mount the stairs again ; just as he reached the landing-place he was met by some man, who said abruptly,

“ Ah, Dr. M‘Crapaud ! you’ve come too late. It’s all over, the woman is past recovery,—indeed, she’s dead.”

“ Good God ! what do you mean ? ” gasped Oliver.

“ Why, who are you, sir ? ”

“ I—why—I—”

“ Are you any connection of this lady, sir ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ No one informed me you were in the house,—why was that ? ”

“ That is not to the purpose. What do you mean by saying— But I insist—I *insist* upon seeing my wife.”

“ Nay, nay, sir, you must bear with the will of Providence ; your wife is in heaven now. It is all for the best, I assure you, sir,” exclaimed the man, breaking the news in the best way he could. “ Good Heavens ! I was not aware—”

“ What’s all for the best ? ” interposed Oliver, without appearing to have understood what the doctor was saying.

“ You no longer have a wife, sir, but the baby lives, and, please God, may continue to.” The florid country doctor spoke in a low nervous tone, for he was evidently rather startled at meeting the dead woman’s husband so unex-

* Confusion.

† Palpitating.

pectedly. "The exhaustion she has gone through to-day has proved too much for the poor lady. It is a painful task, but I am bound to speak plainly, she ought never to have left the place she came from."

"A child born, and my wife dead!"

"Half an hour ago she recovered a little; after that she fainted and never came to again, and never will. Surely, sir, you must have expec—"

"Why wasn't I told?"

"I was not aware you were in the house; I was called quite suddenly, without time for explanation. It is really most—"

"My wife is dead! I hardly expected— Thank you, sir, I am deeply indebted to you for your attention. There seems to be a fate upon my house; I have done nothing to deserve it, but I suppose it must be for the best, as you say. Ah! *Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*"

So saying, Oliver sighed deeply, then turned round, went into the room, and sat down beside his dead wife's bed, with his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand.

Presently Dr. M'Crapaud himself arrived, but it was too late. Both doctors afterwards said that the wildest outburst of horror could not have taken them more aback than the studied politeness and composure with which Mr. Serpleton treated them all that evening; they said they had never met a man like him before, and truly I do not suppose they had. When he was asked if he would consent to some suggestion concerning the treatment of the child, he made answer that he was "delighted." When asked if he would see it, Dr. M'Crapaud's lynx-like eyes noticed him shudder as he replied, "No, I thank you, by

no means." And this was the only sign of feeling both of these honest people managed to elicit from him. He was asked (more for the sake of rousing him than anything else) if he would for the present be satisfied with the nurse who had been procured to attend to the wants of the miserable wailing little morsel of humanity which had so inopportunely entered the world. He replied, "Perfectly," but never looked at her, though she was in the room. The baby cried as though trying to attract its father's attention, but without avail, until it was at last removed down into the warm parlour next the kitchen. In a week it was taken to Cranberry.

In the meantime the window was open, and the cool night air streamed through the curtains, making the dim candle send strange lights and shadows flickering over the dead woman's face. At last it so happened that the curate was left alone in the room for a moment; he rose stealthily, and, leaning over her, kissed the cold temples, then lifted the dead limp hands in his own.

"Who would have dreamt of this yesterday?" he said out loud. "I believe,—at least, I—"

Here, as somebody opened the door, he dropped his wife's hand and retreated back into his chair, like a child caught neglecting its task.

* * * * *

He was reported to have very little feeling, and any one who had witnessed his eccentric behaviour at the funeral (which was managed entirely by his wife's relatives) might have been excused for corroborating this statement. He forgot to take his hat off, and made no responses to the prayers; he evidently desired to leave as soon as possible,

for there was something about the clergyman's appearance which alarmed him beyond measure. Nay, it is even whispered that he threw, by mistake, a pinch of snuff on to his wife's coffin, in lieu of the ashes required by the burial ceremony. Margery took him back with her to Watern Tor, where, she said, he remained in a dazed and stupefied way, doing nothing for a month; at the end of that time he began to arrange his books and writings. He possessed an extensive library, which, with the purchases he soon began to make through the medium of Mr. Ferretem (who, seeing that his bills were now paid, began to respect his patron highly), reached a total of three or four thousand volumes.

There has existed in the world, and will always exist, a certain class of enlightened philosophers who scorn the necessity of art (probably for much the same reason that one might imagine a certain class of unmentionable insects deriding the necessity of cleanliness)—because they are incapable of participating in its benefits. But Mr. Serpleton was not one of these; more than a fourth of his books consisted of a carefully selected collection of the works of the poets of all nations, both ancient and modern. Among these were some of Blake's works—wonderful to relate—though what their owner thought of these productions I cannot say. Indeed, Mr. Serpleton had written poetry himself in his younger days, that is to say when thirteen or fourteen, for he was always very precocious and eccentric.

A carpenter was sent for from Limmerstone, who was instructed to fit up several of the upper rooms with shelves, and on these shelves the books were arranged.

Mr. Serpleton's favourite place of study consisted of the landing-place outside his bedroom, where there was a settle fixed under the window ; there he would sit absorbed for hours in the contemplation of some old mouldy volume or other. It was here that Margery once found him, remonstrating feebly and ineffectually with a sportively-inclined kitten, which, having knocked the book out of his hands, had not been content thereat, but had mounted on the window-sill, and from thence had maintained a fierce and unintermittent warfare on the black ribbons of his queue. Then this feline imp proceeded to clasp him round the neck with her soft fore-paws, and to go through many wonderful gymnastic evolutions on his shoulders, until, with the old servant's assistance, it was dislodged, only to return to the assault when she was gone. In fact, the poor man fell a martyr to this animal, and always promptly disappeared when it met his view. But at last the animal grew up, became more grave in demeanour, and left him in peace.

Very few people could have guessed that he was all this time grieving deeply over the loss of his wife. Yet if any one of those who sneered at him could have looked into Oliver's secret heart, he would have thought very differently. But it is sometimes awful to think how little we really are capable of fathoming the minds of the very people who are nearest and dearest to us ; and seeing this is the case, it is easy to understand the way our actions are misinterpreted by strangers.

The next four years have very little interest for the reader, and may be safely allowed to slip by without comment : save that Oliver, at the expiration of three years,

insisted on his little daughter Leah being removed from Cranberry, where she was “vety-nussed,” as Margery contemptuously termed it, and brought into the shelter of the house at Watern Tor, where he continued to reside, chiefly because he was utterly incapable (even with the strongest spectacles) of seeing any way to escape from its precincts. He was often seen wandering about the grounds, with the child toddling beside him as well as it was able. Margery Wilmot, now resigned to her fate, tended it very carefully; it was one of the strange contradictions of this woman’s nature that she was inordinately fond of children and cats.

But the way Mr. Serpleton first made his daughter’s acquaintance is too eccentric and singular to be passed over, or compressed into the end of a chapter.

CHAPTER V.

RESULTS.

As I have said, in about a month he commenced setting his books in order; by about the end of the year he had quite fallen into his old bad habits, save that he could scarcely turn his head without some painful reminiscence being brought to view. But next to pleasure, its remembrance is sweetest, and sadness becomes at last a desideratum in some natures; in fact, it becomes a pleasure. When that time had passed he managed to find his way to Cran-

berry, and to the cottage where his own child lived : he had never seen or mentioned her before. He found a whole band of children playing and shouting on the door-step, and paused over them in momentary confusion, then adjusted his spectacles and seized upon one at random. He appeared for a moment about to depart with his burden there and then, until the astonished matron succeeded in impressing upon him the fact that it was her youngest boy whom he had taken possession of, just a year and three months older than his own little girl, she said. On learning this, he put it down again, and bowed politely, saying it was no matter. He also appears to have added something else, which was too long a word for my informant's memory ; it might from her description have resembled the adjective "immaterial."

The fond father *did*, however, become acquainted with little Leah, who was sprawling on the floor of an inner room, attached by a long string to the leg of a table, a string just long enough to keep her from crawling over the fender among the fire-irons, the attainment of that act being at present her most exalted ambition. Upon introduction the baby crowed and chuckled after the manner of its kind, but appeared much astonished at the strange mistakes in etiquette the father made in his efforts to become intimate with it. It objected to being held upside down, even in its father's hands, and testified to its objection by getting black in the face, and wailing piteously. The foster-mother meanwhile endeavoured to teach him how to hold the child, though without avail. Wishing to make herself agreeable, she observed that it was very like its mother already ; a fact that she must have taken on hearsay, for she could never

have seen her. Mrs. Vagoter afterwards asserted that she nearly went into a “vit o’ galavins” at the expression of Mr. Serpleton’s face when, after repeating her observation five times, she caused him to pay attention and understand her meaning. After this he put the baby upon the ground again, where it lay down in contentment, while he retreated back into the cheerful shadow of his “Studies towards a Topographical and Archæological and Historical Account of the North of Devonshire,” which was now advancing towards the end of the second of its twelve contemplated volumes.

With an eye to the amplification of that highly interesting work, Mr. Serpleton often had occasion to question Margery on the subject of old country legends, out-of-the-way expressions, and names, etc. Now he was obliged in one section of his book to give some account of his own family, the extent of its ancient possessions, and its present relative unimportance, which he did most conscientiously, even down to informing the public who it was that lived in Serpleton House at the time he was writing, though he became much embarrassed when he suddenly recollect ed that he was describing his own household.

Margery proved a perfect mine of information concerning the house of Serpleton and its ancient grandeur. She told him an innumerable amount of wild rumours and tales she had learnt from her grandmother and mother, which, on more mature consideration, Mr. Serpleton erased from the manuscript pages in which he had carefully detailed her conversation. Nevertheless, I trust they may not be without their interest to my readers, for they are certainly of vital

import in the explanation they throw over the psychological development of my story.*

He contented himself with a cautious observation to the effect that many singular legends existed in the environs of Watern with regard to their (the Serpleton family's) eccentricities.

The late Mrs. Serpleton's servant Jenny continued to make Watern Tor her residence for about two months after her mistress's decease: at the end of that time she was expelled for general "fractiousness," or insubordination. It appears that Margery (alarmed at the unusual "squanderous" expenditure of her establishment), collecting the scraps of a whole week into one heap, and producing them on a Saturday evening, playfully demanded that Jenny should regale herself thereon, the conditions being that she (Jenny) should have nothing else till she had finished "th' learest scran† on't, tha daft, heedless flamakin!" as Margery called her, adding insult to injury. She also remarked that the fowls would not eat them, and somebody *must*. After that decisive statement, she began to pour forth many vituperative hints and insinuations relative to a certain "Trapseing, hautecking, kerping, pigsnie," who was in the habit of "gadding out aterneeart" with pink "rory-tory‡ ribbands" in her "kep;" in fact, concerning the general morality of whose conduct no amount of "halzening" § could be considered as an exaggeration.

* These memorials of the Serpletons were eventually worked up by the author into his "Introduction."

† Scrap.

‡ Tawdry.

§ Predicting the worst that can happen—a very fine word, and one that should not be allowed to die out.

This tirade naturally provoked Jenny into retorting that she was "quite good enoo' for Margery," she being "jist as the Lord hed chuzzin ter mek her, naught else!"

"More's th' pity!" quoth Margery scornfully. "A' must a' beed cruel hard up fer summat ter dew th' marn, squandering a's hendywerk on a Grizzle-de-Morndy loik ter thicker!"

"Grizzle-de-Morndy a kether!" muttered the frail Jenny, in extreme derision. "Tha'rt a Grizzle-de-Twsedey i' th' bargan!"

In fact, as can be plainly seen, Jenny's virtuous indignation at the combination of insults she was subjected to became very difficult to suppress, and just stopped short at open defiance. But immediately afterwards she was detected in the act of stealthily emptying her trencher into the dust-bin, for which enormity she was condignly dismissed.

* * * * *

As has been said, Leah came home to live with her father at the termination of three years; during the next two nothing took place which would be worth the trouble of narrating. At the end of the fifth year, however, an event happened which is of far too important a nature to be alluded to in this chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

HELEN.

ONE afternoon in July 1810, Oliver Serpleton received, to his astonishment, a brief letter, or rather one might say a small document, folded, and sealed with wax, and marked "Immediate." This was delivered to him by a man who met him in the neighbourhood of Watern Tor, where he and his eccentricities were well known.

Before he could open it he was required to pay ten-and-sixpence. Now all the money he possessed (payable quarterly) was kept loose in a bowl on his desk, and until one quarter's money was spent he never demanded the other. Margery's sense both of honesty and economy being preternaturally strict, the first quarter's income usually lasted the whole year, leaving the rest to accumulate at his banker's; consequently Oliver in the course of time was growing wealthy. But he never by any chance had one farthing in his pockets, through all of which he now searched, long and vainly, until he bethought him of proceeding home and calling Margery to his assistance. That worthy woman was prevailed upon to produce the money, though she did it with many wry faces and much useless dissertation on the extra sixpence, which she tried vainly to save amid the general ruin.

The letter was at last delivered into Oliver's hand: he opening it very unwillingly, for he held it to be but as a delusion and a snare, or, to speak more plainly, he considered it as a communication from the London firm who

were publishing the first volumes of his great geological and antiquarian work on Devonshire. Now the man of science had a most innate horror of these worthy people, which was probably induced by the fact that they were in the habit of innocently sending him, amongst others, many most virulent reviews on that ponderous production of his intellectual powers. Men of science, nowadays, are well-known for their mutual toleration and amiability; instead of disagreeing among themselves they are contented with savage attacks on poor inoffensive poets and innocent writers of fiction. But in those days it was evident that a perfect struggle for existence was going on among them. The laborious deductions which Oliver drew from every conceivable source among the parish records were assailed on all sides. His account of the Exeter pestilence of 1378 was ridiculed, and the fact that he distinctly proved the abbot of Buckfastleigh to have been possessed of a residence in that town (1050?) was not only passed over, *but stolen by somebody else.* To crown all, his elaborate account of the Hydrological Outline of the hills round Morebath, "lying, as is well-known, in the Hundred of Bampton and Deanery of Tiverton," was flatly contradicted!

Oliver was roused, and sent forth a pamphlet (409 pages long) in refutation of these insulting statements. This pamphlet, I regret to state, did not sell.

The last number of the "Archaeological Review" which had reached him contained a very savage attack indeed; it was written, probably, by some rival archæologist. This enlightened individual, having occasion to disagree from Oliver's views on the discovery of the famous logan stone

of Standard-combe, thought fit to embellish his own views by giving a short though spiteful account of his unoffending adversary's exploits while holding the cure of souls in Matyard-Torin-cum-Gowdhurst.

How he had learnt of these I cannot say; but, if his object was to disturb Mr. Serpleton's equanimity, he certainly succeeded. The author of the "History of Devonshire" never examined the pages of a review again without fear and trembling.

So the clergyman opened the letter with visibly reluctant fingers; while Margery stood upon tiptoe with the aid of her broom, and looked over the slope of his shoulder as he read it, for she was a true daughter of Eve. But in spite of her curiosity she was quite incapable of reading what follows:—

" London, Charlotte St.,
Fitzroy Square,
July 14th, 1810.

" My dear Nolly,

" You may not be aware that my wife is dead. I myself am just upon the point of starting on a long sea voyage, and, though I should like to take my little daughter with me, it is impossible. I desire, before I leave, to see you once more, but partly for the purpose of handing her over to you, who, I trust, will be a farther to her in my absence. I shall bring poor Nelly home with me; she is just five, if I remember rightly, though she seems older. Being a clergyman of the Church of England, I think you are better fitted to take charge of her than any one else my desultory life has made me acquainted with, and I

trust you will not refuse me a boon which I shall soon ask in person.

Believe me

Your loving brother,

“JEFFERY SERPLETON.”

“Ump! Eh! Oh! Poor Jeffery!” said Oliver aloud, after reading this epistle. “He spells father with an *r*, bad! bad! Clergyman of the Church of Eng—I am no more one than he is! What can Jeffery be thinking about? He makes me quite uncomfortable!”

He remained for some time in a state of nervous bewilderment, in spite of Margery’s zealous efforts to rouse him into delivering the secrets which seemed to oppress his mind. At last he told her.

“I am to take care of Jeffery’s little girl. I was not aware he had one—or—rather—I supposed him to have several. Perhaps he has! If so, I trust he may not bring them all.” Oliver was growing alarmed.

“That ’er one as wert born hare?” interrupted Margery.

“I am not aware.”

“Whare’s th’ muthor, zir?”

“I am not aware. Dead.”

“Hot? Whan?”

“Not aware.”

“Eh! lock! lock! What’ll become of her now? Th’ Lard aloize her wis hare zins!” soliloquised the pious Margery, lifting her work-worn hands up, to give emphasis to these theological speculations.

“Nobody knows, nobody knows,” answered Oliver in an abrupt, not to say a snappish manner. “They are coming

here to-night: at least, I believe so. I think so. Where's the letter?" But he had mislaid it in some of his pockets, and could not find it to refer to.

Margery now began to show signs of discontent.

"Eh! and they'd be wanting something over (extra) for dinner, she'd warent," she solemnly and peevishly asserted. For this last requirement was not in strict accordance with the rigid rules of economy she had learnt some fifty years back from her mother, and had been in the habit of practising ever since.

"Leg of mutton, leg of mutton," said Oliver, gazing intently at the flies on the ceiling; it being his invariable custom to throw back his head and gaze firmly towards the heavens when requiring support in moments of perplexity.

But Margery made some pertinent remark to the effect that it would be ridiculous to suppose that a leg of mutton would be enough to satisfy the appetite of a Londoner—one of a people among whom it was, she asserted with all the credulity of a countrywoman, a common practice to dine on whole roasted oxen.

"Then get two legs of mutton—or if necessary three," remarked Oliver, with that profound self-confidence which a long experience of the precepts of practical house-keeping alone could bestow. Now the conversation ceased, and Mr. Serpleton went to his study.

Later on in the day, as the twilight was advancing, Margery saw him binding his comforter about his throat, and making vain efforts to find his hat upon the empty pegs in the passage. She inferred that he was going out, and called Leah to her side that she might "fix her rewdens up," as her "feythur" was about "ter gad out i' th' creepy-

crawly,"*—she (Leah) being "boundend" to accompany him on the said nocturnal expedition.

Accordingly they both set off along the road. If he went that way in the expectation of meeting his brother Jeffery, or if it was simply because Leah pulled the skirts of his coat in that direction, I cannot say. These skirts served Leah for reins as she trotted by his side. Wherever she chose to pull them the obedient ex-officiating curate walked; indeed, had he been a blind beggar and she his dog, he could not have obeyed her guidance more implicitly. Sometimes the child would run so recklessly after butterflies and flowers or floating thistle-downs, that before her unfortunate father could recover from his habitual abstraction, he often found himself placed in most grievously dangerous positions—positions, moreover, which required all his available shift and presence of mind to escape from again.

To-night it was the soul-tantalizing lustre of a glow-worm which seduced Leah's fidelity; they both quitted the path in a vain attempt to secure it on her part.

It was up among the rocks and impossible to reach. As they both turned back the curate knocked his shins against the edge of a rock—not badly however, but still badly enough to make him utter a shrill exclamation of surprise, which sounded (in the darkness of the hollow into which

* An astute and aged local philologist to whom I had the honour of submitting this word informed me that it had been in common use in his youth; "it was a childish term," said he, "caught up by elder people, and used as being expressive of the stealthy and supernatural character of the twilight"; and doubtless he may be in the right. But I am more inclined to derive it from the French word *crépuscule*.

he had penetrated) like the cry of some nocturnal animal of the bat species.

With great caution he began to pick his way back on to the road, through the rocks. He was so absorbed in this occupation that he did not notice a man who stood there, forming a black figure which resembled a "silhouette," as it was seen against the sky. By his side a little girl was standing whose acute eyes seemed to sparkle even in the darkness. Her hair (which was so black as to form a still blacker spot in the obscurity of the night) was filled with a most extraordinary display of moving lights; in fact, a multitude of living glow-worms were crawling about in it.

"Is that you, Nolly?" inquired the man.

"*That*, uncle Nolly?" cried the child at his side, pointing one of her fingers at the hardly discernible figure of the curate.

"There can't be any one else about here. Hi! Don't you hear me? It must be him—nobody else could go on in that way. Why, it is you, Nolly!" said Jeffery, advancing towards his brother, who had now reached the road.

"Eh . . . who . . . are . . . you? I beg . . . did you . . . speak?" answered Oliver, noticing him for the first time.

"Now don't be affected, Nolly," said Jeffery, almost irritably. "I'm your brother and I've been very much worried of late; won't you shake hands?"

"Of course you are—I remember . . ." said Oliver with a profound air of conviction, but without paying the slightest attention to this modest request; on the contrary,

he retreated away from his brother till he backed up against a rock by the roadside and could go no further. There he remained, with Leah clutching tight hold of his coat, while she examined the other child with much the same alarmed curiosity with which a puppy gazes upon a strange kitten.

“I have lived very much alone of late. ‘Nunquam minus solus quam . . .’” the curate muttered at last, by way of agreeably sustaining the conversation, but in a voice so feeble that it completely died away towards the end. If Voltaire’s remark, “le secret d’ennuyer est celui de tout dire,” be true, Mr. Serpleton must have been one of the most entertaining persons in all creation ; for he seldom finished a single sentence when he had to speak.

“I suppose you mean that as a hint for me to go ?”

“I think . . . at least I . . . Oh *no*. On the contrary ! I am indeed very glad to see you . . . and . . . to assure you of my . . . respec—at least I mean my sympathy . . . for your troubles.”

“*Won’t* you shake hands, then ?”

I suppose Oliver still considered his brother to be a boisterous young man who would interrupt his studies—perhaps even shake him about or otherwise maltreat him, as he had been wont to do in childhood. Anyhow he now advanced to comply with this request in obvious reluctance.

“If you please, Jeffery,” he pleaded modestly, “don’t wring my hand *very* hard. I remember that the last time I met . . .”

Here he paused and in his confusion delivered his left

hand to his brother, who shook it warmly but retained hold of it, much to Oliver's discomfiture, he having intended to retreat again to a safe distance.

"Now, Nolly," the other said, "I have brought you my little girl."

"Is she the only one?" interrupted Oliver anxiously.

"You will take care of her," his brother continued without noticing this remark. "I know you will. I can do nothing for her myself; you see her mother is dead—has been dead more than a year now—and I am going away and can't take her with me. She can live here perfectly; can't she?"

"Oh! . . . yes," remarked Oliver, gazing vacantly round him in the darkness, as though he had some idea of domiciling the child among the rocks.

"Shake hands with your uncle, my child."

Oliver felt his right hand unexpectedly grasped by the icily cold little fingers, whose touch seemed to send a thrill through his whole system. He saluted them with a cry of astonishment resembling a hysterical shriek, "Ai! ai!" but felt quite incapable of withdrawing it.

"I am to kiss you!" he heard a small shrill voice proclaim, but he took no notice of it.

"Please bend down," the voice proceeded.

At this he bent down obediently, though with considerable trepidation. Leah clung to the tails of his coat; Jeffery held his left hand firmly, Helen clasped his right. But she quickly released it and put her arms round his neck, for she detected symptoms of a desire to rise again, and she wished to kiss him at her leisure. She first attempted his

eyes, but found them guarded by his spectacles ; she was evidently as capricious as the reflection of a sunbeam for she selected several plans which she deserted again. At last she was content to leave the print of her lips upon his nose ; then she released him and he rose, apparently very much astonished at having passed so safely through so trying an ordeal. He grew quite absent-minded with surprise. "Nil est tertium," he muttered. "Aut amat aut odit mulier ; nil est tertium."

Suddenly he became aware that his brother was shaking him by the shoulder.

"What . . . do . . . you . . . want . . . Jeffery ?" he inquired.

"Is that your own child, Nolly, beside you ?"

"Ye . . . ye . . . yes . . . at least I . . . think so," Oliver remarked, looking nervously over his shoulder, as though he half expected to find a changeling in the child's place.

"What's your name ?" said Jeffery to Leah.

"A' daunt knew," quoth the little countrywoman gruffly.

"Let's have a look at you," said Jeffery, and he caught his little niece up in his arms, to bring her face nearer his own, for they could hardly see each other in the dusk.

Leah seemed at first inclined to submit patiently to this operation, though she clung tight to the skirt of her father's coat the whole while, so that it was nearly torn off his back.

But presently she not only began to cry, but to kick and claw her uncle's hand with her vicious little finger-nails as

well. He set her down on the ground again with a laugh and an observation to the effect that she would be a "spiteful little devil some day."

"An' tha twick ma agearn a'll vig tha," she screamed threateningly, for she was a spoilt child.

"Did she scratch you, papa?" cried Helen in some degree of astonishment at this uncalled-for conduct.

The child's innate spirit of pugnacity seemed roused by this trifling encounter; her appetite was whetted. Just at this instant her attention was attracted by the glow-worms in her cousin's hair, and she made a dash at them, trying to snatch some away. This being a proceeding unjustifiable according to childish logic, it was vigorously and successfully resisted. Failing in her meritorious design, the virtuous Leah burst into tears.

"Oh! the cross-patch!" she cried ruefully.

"Oh! you *little* spitfire!" cried the other in a tone, the profound indignation of which would be inimitable. It was an ominous introduction these two cousins had to each other, considering that henceforth they were to live together for a good part of their lives.

"Ah! by God, they're fighting already," remarked Jeffery in a scientific way—much as though he were presiding over one of the cock-fighting matches he had assisted at long years since. "Women *will* fight among themselves at times," he added.

"Les hommes sont la cause que les femmes ne s'aiment point," said the curate philosophically; though I fancy, if he had reflected, he would have come to the conclusion that it was somewhat early in life for his niece and daughter to have La Bruyère's aphorism personally applied to

them as illustrative of the cause of their infantine disagreements.

Some reflection of this order seemed to strike his brother, for he remarked abruptly, "When they grow up, I suppose, you mean?"

"Eh?"

"Never mind. Are you certain your old nurse Margery knows you're out at an hour like this?" inquired Jeffery, unable to resist the temptation of bantering his respected brother.

"I think so," said Oliver in perfect good faith, "though truly I am not aware."

"Does she look after you well?"

"She sometimes destroys my manuscripts to light the . . . or at least she did so once, but upon . . .

"Has she ever had her fowls stolen again?"

"I was not aware she had any fowls. At least I . . . Oh yes! I know there is a cock, for he crows all day long. Indeed, he creates great disturbance. I have had to remonstrate with him. At least, I mean . . . I mean . . . with . . ." Here poor Oliver lost the thread of his discourse, and after some indistinct muttering he became quiet. At the same time he made a stealthy but futile effort to withdraw the hand which his importunate brother had again taken.

At length he became aware that he was being spoken to. "I don't disguise from you that I may be many years absent," he heard Jeffery saying. "I have a devil in me that won't let me stop quiet."

"What?"

"Never mind now, Nolly, for I see you don't understand

me. Do you know I have heard a lot of scientific people talking about you in London ? I have been asked all sorts of questions about you."

" I think . . . at least . . . I wish they would mind their own — ”

" It was at some evening given by the Royal So— ”

" I desire to hear nothing about it."

At this severe repulse Jeffery was silent, and kept so for awhile ; indeed, he seemed scarcely to know what to say.

" Look here, Nolly ! " he exclaimed at length, and with such energy that his nervous brother started, " I can't face the old house again ; I daren't. I have given you the child ; and although I should like to spend a day or two with you, I can't ; for I should go mad if I slept in one of those rooms again. Good God ! what ghosts they must all be haunted by, heigho !

" Dear me ! " said the curate, " ghosts ! I had no idea you were superstitious, Jeffery."

" My ghosts are immaterial ones, they exist only in my own eye-sight."

" Most objects of superstition are quite immaterial," rejoined Oliver with extreme presence of mind.

Here I deeply regret to be obliged to confess that he could not resist the opportunity given him of quoting the following subtle but most erroneous words of his favourite author, " Pour qui ne les croit pas," muttered he, " il n'est pas de prodiges." But I am glad to say that it was in such a low voice that his brother, who chanced to be speaking himself at the time, did not hear him. Even Jeffery, proverbial " blind-blossom " and scape-grace though he was, could

not have failed to be scandalized at such sentiments on the lips of a clergyman.

“Take Helen with you,” said the unconscious Jeffery, not without some emotion in his voice. “Take her with you, and let us part here. She’ll be a woman perhaps before I come back to claim her. Good-bye! Shake hands once more.”

Oliver, who had just finished speaking to himself, first exclaimed “Dear me!” and then said “Good-bye,” but allowed his brother to shake his captive hand without the faintest obvious reluctance.

Then Jeffery resigned his brother’s fingers and bent over to kiss his daughter’s face. “My dear,” he said, “those are nasty things to wear in your hair. Some day I’ll bring back some fire-flies for you to use instead.”

“I never heard of fire-flies, what are they?”

“Flying glow-worms.”

“Bring a whole great boxful,” said the child in a sudden fit of enthusiasm. “But how should I fasten them if they are able to fly away?”

“The ladies use pins in Mexico.”

“Ugh! that’s *too* cruel.”

“Well, good-bye, my darling.”

Saying this, he caught the child’s slender form up in his arms with rough but evident tenderness and kissed her fervently, while the dim lights in the ringlets of her hair emitted a vague reflection on his worn, haggard features.

“Good-bye, papa.”

Then he set her down; and in another moment, with the sound of a kiss, he was gone into the darkness. The child seemed to utter an exclamation resembling a sup-

pressed sob ; but if she did, she must have struggled hard to prevent its recurrence.

All the pathos and beauty of the scene, vaguely defined as it was, had been wasted on the absent-minded Oliver, who was standing with his eyes fixed upon the depths of the windy sky, as though he were speculating as to whether it could be that the stars were drifting past behind the clouds, or the clouds were drifting by in front of the stars.

But he was at last recalled to himself by a distant voice which shouted, "Don't you think you had better go home, Nolly ? The night-mist's rising and you might catch cold in it."

"Now I think of it," said Oliver hurriedly, for he was evidently perturbed in mind by some painful reminiscence which this advice awakened, "I think I had. Good-bye to you . . . my dear brother Jeffery—have no care for the well-being . . . of your offspring." This reassuring speech was pronounced in a hurried nervous whisper, that seemed by no means calculated to reach the ear of the person for whom Mr. Serpleton intended it. "By the way, I remember now," he continued in the same modulated key, "what I have been desirous of saying to you, Jeffery. Father *is not* spelt with an *r*. You were sadly in the habit of neglecting . . ."

But at this juncture, some mysterious instinct made him aware that his illiterate brother was no longer beside him, and was consequently incapable of profiting by his instruction. "Dear ! dear me !" he exclaimed, stopping short and gazing blankly into the night.

Helen beside him also wished to lay some last injunction on her father, for she cried, "Remember ! Remember ! you

are to bring me back a box of fire-flies, and I'll tie them with— : ” but here her infantine fortitude failed her. She burst into tears and began sobbing till it seemed as though she meant to weep her bright little eyes away.

Oliver Serpleton was not a little alarmed when he became aware of this singularly unaccountable conduct ; he examined the sky once more from horizon to zenith, and then inquired if they had not better “ go home to Margery.”

“ I want papa,” sobbed Helen.

“ Dear me,” remarked the curate ; “ I am afraid that . . . Dear me ! Had . . . we . . . not . . . better . . . go . . . home ? ” he again demanded in a plaintive voice.

“ Perhaps we had,” sobbed Helen ; “ but I want papa.”

However, she once more clasped her uncle’s hand with her own icily cold little fingers (for the unreasoning desire to hold a “ grown-up’s ” hand amounts to an instinct in all children) ; and he, seeing nothing else to do, extended his other hand to Leah in preparation to proceed home-wards. Leah, from the silence she maintained, appeared as though she was somewhat intimidated by the unexpected resistance she had received in her nefarious designs upon her cousin’s glow-worms. The truth is she was very sleepy and desired to “ gad whame,” as she audibly expressed it.

But just at this point a sudden idea, connected with an obscure Hebrew adjective, evolved itself in Mr. Serpleton’s brain ; it puzzled him and he stood stockstill, reflecting over it for many minutes. Presently his misgiving (for such it was) allayed itself again, and placed him once more in freedom. After this he began to move briskly in

the wrong direction, till he suddenly recollected himself and turned back along the road to Watern Tor. At last ("mirabile dictu!" as he himself would have said, had he been capable of regarding his character in the same light in which it is presented here) he managed to reach Serspleton House in safety; and Helen's hand was still clasped tightly in his as they crossed the threshold of her future home.

It will perhaps be hereafter seen by the reader that any one who treated her with sympathy could have persuaded her into doing anything, but she was resentful to a fault, and decidedly of a turbulent disposition; for, on the night of her arrival at Watern Tor, she not only refused to cease crying and sobbing for the immediate return of her papa, but even went so far as to resist strenuously when Margery proposed to remove the glow-worms wherewith she had chosen to embellish her hair. But the crafty Margery bided her time, and under pretence of caressing her, succeeded in removing them without attracting her attention; so that it is to be feared that these unfortunate insects came to a premature and unpoetical end.

This done, she attempted with her hands to smooth down the child's wild elf-like locks of hair into some vague appearance of submission.

But this she soon found to be impossible; for the more vigorously she brushed them down the more obstinately they eluded her exertions, and sprang up again.

When children are crying and grieving over any subject—say the disappearance of a toy, the loss of a near relative, or anything in fact which concerns them very nearly,—my readers may have observed that the outbursts with which

they appease their little hearts grow more and more violent, but at the same time occur at wider and wider intervals, till at last a lapse comes in which they cease altogether.

Helen ceased crying much in the same way; but at the same moment she became aware of the glow-worms being no longer in her hair; and in less time than it takes to describe the occurrence she flew into so wild a passion that the old housekeeper gazed upon her with astonishment that was tempered with alarm.

She refused to eat her supper; indeed, she was terribly in earnest. Margery, vainly trying to pacify the child, was much shocked to learn that she considered her to be nothing more or less than an elderly “devil.”

It is to be presumed that Helen had learnt such language from her papa.

At last, seeing that the insects were not forthcoming, she allowed herself to be put to bed.

Subsequently the old housekeeper found occasion to enter her master’s study, and endeavour to interrogate him on the subject of certain mysterious articles of under-clothing, which it appears should have accompanied the child he had brought to her, so unexpectedly that, as she remarked, “it took her breath away.”

Mr. Serleton looked up from his work, and professed extreme ignorance on the subject. Nothing had been given to him, he said.

“Not even a chimee?” she exclaimed in a tone of ex-postulation.

“No. She was just as she is at present...at least...is she in bed?”

"Yes, zir."

"You must do as you best can for her. She must be treated with great attention... and I should advise you not to be more ill-tempered with her than you can help, and to use more tact... for... she is noticeably of a very singular disposition."

*BOOK II.—SERPLETON HOUSE
AND ITS INMATES.*

CHAPTER I.

SERPLETON HOUSE.

SERPLETON HOUSE, a country mansion rebuilt after a visitation of fire during the year 1729, stood sheltered in the secluded hollow of a desolate hillside. Through its windows in one direction, it looked down a great winding irregular ravine, across the banks of the T— (just visible among the trees that overhung its waters), and over the steep inclines and dreary waste-lands of Dartmoor. On the other side one saw straight out between two high crumbling cliffs of rock, wind-discoloured and weather-beaten. Through these a second swift stream descended from stone to stone ; when the sun shone its waters were visible in places, glistening through the heart of the deep vegetation and foliage they helped to nourish. Far behind a glimpse was obtained of the open sparsely-cultivated country, blue as indigo with the distance, surrounding the receding heights on which the ancient village and hamlet of Moortton stood.

The house was picturesquely designed, as are all the steads and buildings thereabout ; its walls were constructed out of the limestone and white rocks with which the summits

and declivities of the Devonshire inland hills are strewn so wildly, all flecked in places with grey mosses and weather-stains; they were in reality quite dry even to crumbling, though they looked as if the stone had absorbed large quantities of moisture which had not dried out again.

Half up one side looking westerly, an over-growth of dark-leaved ivy was slowly extending its tendrils.

The house was square in outline and very simple in the disposition of its casements, all of which were closed at night with old-fashioned shutters that opened back outside, on the walls. There was, however, a large porch in front, with a protuberant bay-window on each side. The front door seemed to be an undestroyed fragment of the old half-mediæval building; it was arched and formed of strong oak, with a rusty iron tracery of flower-tendrils and serpents, let in to strengthen the wood still further. This usually hung open, leaving a narrow glimpse of a dark panelled passage, paved with the same cool red bricks of which the floor of the porch was formed.

Purple heather and golden furze-blossoms, which at that season flourished all over the sterile hillside, grew close under the very walls of a straggling neglected garden that extended round three sides of the house.

The paths in this garden were all overtangled with wild-briars, brambles, gooseberry bushes, and weeds, with here and there a bright wild-rose emerging, as if half-choked among the thorny embraces of the thistles. In one corner an enormous wind-distorted elm rose with a dark, unhealthy profusion of foliage; some of its long branches rubbing against the side of the house, on the wall of which a long

damp stain showed the point of contact. Outside the garden-gateway an old lime-stained cart, all rotting to pieces from exposure to the rain (one of the wheels had dropped off and lay by its side), was propped up against the wall. On the right-hand of this gate a flat white stone was inserted ; carved in bas-relief with a serpent writhing from side to side, standing on its tail, and threatening the spectator with its large-fanged head ; a grey indentation showed that the forked tongue had been broken away. On the carved inscription-roll underneath, one could indistinctly make out the motto, “ *Fligo postea Sibilo.* ”

Against the back of the house, in an angle made by two walls, a spacious hen-house was built—formed of two or three upright posts with a latticework of wood nailed across them, and roofed with a strong network of cord ; most likely to restrain the depredations of any stray hawk, which, grown overbold in the deep seclusion of the moors, might be tempted to swoop down on the young chickens. Out of this place the loud harsh crowing of the scarlet-feathered cock resounded night and morning and at intervals throughout the daytime. An old picturesque and twisted pear-tree, long past bearing, grew right out of the rough stones with which the backyard was paved, the scanty foliage of its over-hanging branches throwing a kind of shelter across them ; though at a certain period of the afternoon the broad shadow of the elm fell all over the place. Here in one corner stood the characteristic well, with its brick walls, wooden roof, and iron handle to wind the bucket up and down—a contrivance essential to the life and comfort of a Devonshire household.

A rough-looking road, winding through the rocks and

fissures in the sun-burnt soil, led down the numerous turnings of the glen to the left. It passed through a shallow ford in the petulant clamouring stream, over the glancing waters of which a single quivering plank, colloquially called a "clam," lay for the accommodation of foot-passengers. A little way beyond, the path receded behind Watern Tor, the hill at the base of which the house stood. Thence it stretched in serpentine curves—a white line sunken deep in the dark heather—over the undulations of the moorland, to join the high-road in the direction of Okehampton, some fifteen miles distant. The deep ruts worn in the road long years since were fringed with an under-growth of rank weed; the way in fact seemed almost impassable from neglect, excepting to horsemen or foot-travellers.

This desolate mansion must have been situated some considerable distance from the nearest place of human residence. Now and then, in the warmth of the afternoon, an elderly countrywoman, clad in the homespun garb of the Dartmoor peasantry and sitting on a low stool at the back kitchen-door, could be seen whirling her spinning-wheel, the sleepy drone-like whirring of which seemed only to intensify the silence. Usually a lustrous-skinned black cat lay beside her, blinking its bright green eyes, and basking solemnly in the nearest patch of sunshine. The animal had grown so indolent that it was too lazy to follow the receding light, and could often be seen covered up in the advancing blue shadows.

All around the house an incessant murmur vibrated, sometimes so feebly that one lost the sound, and again, when the wind blew favourably, strengthening into a shrill

contention. It was caused by the two descending torrents of the W—— and the T——, both of which united together in a deep dark pool about a mile ahead, so that the house stood on the secluded ground between them.

Far off in the dim distance, the combined torrent could be viewed from the upper windows ; winding swiftly along in a dark silvery stream, between the lonely hills of a deep valley which rose right in front, and seemed to lead many miles away into where the dimmest verge of the azure atmosphere mingled with the land in one indistinguishable belt of blue vapour.

When the sultry sun shone over the banks of these two wild streams, it made the swift-coiling eddies flash, the drifting foam-flakes sparkle, and edged the glistening rims of the dark spray-drenched rocks as with touches of burnished gold. Now and then, undisturbed in his lonely supremacy, a king-fisher would flit like a brilliantly blue flame from bank to bank ; but other animal or insect life seemed not to exist within the deafening sound of the stream—the very buzz appeared to flit by in silence. None of the trees which clustered so thickly down the banks were of any considerable size ; they consisted for the most part of dwarfed and sterile oaks standing clear of one another among the rock fragments. At intervals one occurred, which was forked, split up, or so distorted as to dispel any idea of monotony among them. The mossy bark seemed perpetually crumbling off their gnarled and twisted trunks, and the winding roots were everywhere bursting from the dry soil. Overhead their distended limbs were indiscriminately locked and twisted together. Between the interstices of the leaves (dispelling the evil-

looking gloom in the recesses of the rabbit-haunted hollows) the radiant sunbeams would slant evenly in one direction; sometimes falling on the brown leaf-strewn earth, sometimes alighting on the green moss-coloured rocks. Now and then a brown song-thrush might break from the foliage in a short flight from branch to branch; but its singing would be drowned in the noise of the descending water.

CHAPTER II.

THE INMATES.

ALONG the unequal wood-paths near the deep mire at the confluence of the two streams; in a place where all speech was stupefied by the uproar of the water, as it dashed wildly from rock to rock, on the afternoon of a sultry day in August 1816, a young child might have been observed wandering between the picturesque rocks, or gliding in and out of the flashes of tremulous sunlight and the blue shadows.

She could scarcely have been five years of age, although she looked older; perhaps from the vivacious quickness of her movements, and the keen vacillatory but all-observant flash of her large dark eyes. These features of her face were perfectly lovely in the formation of their brows and lids, fringed with dark shadowy lashes. The pupils were so bright that it seemed as if her sight could pierce through, even into the very cores of the rocks and trees when it glanced upon them. Her little wilful dark-com-

plexioned face seemed like a young gipsy's in character; the chin was curled and pointed, the pale childish cheeks were very small and diminished, the thin purely-curved mouth, deep in colour as a dark-red cherry, became at times almost bitter in expression. Some vague Eastern influence seemed to linger in the lineaments; whence derived it was impossible to guess. The delirious energetic vivacity which occurs sometimes in the cold western climates, and the subtly blended poetry and enervation of the Orient, seemed mingled in her.

At first sight there appeared to be something so weird as to be almost repulsive in the child's half-elfish aspect; a passing impression, soon dispelled by the spiritual charm and allurement which undoubtedly existed in the hardly infantine beauty of her features; there was a wonderfully mysterious refinement through every portion of her figure. At times, when some favourable expression stole over her clear diaphanous face, it grew simply exquisite.

Strange, unaccountable revulsions of deep liking and deeper aversion seemed to thrill continually through her little mind—feelings such as appear to be communicated magnetically into the minds of those who unconsciously create them, so intense are they in some organizations. That reader who instinctively shrinks from the sadly-perplexed character of the future heroine of this narrative may therefore remember that it is simply because she would just as instinctively have shrunk from him, had the vagaries of chance ever drawn them together during her short and troubled life.

A child's face resembles an unexpanded bud. As a thinker examines the undeveloped promise of the coming

blossom, he sees the remote future lying before it ; filled, maybe, with the vague ineffable luxuriousness of the dream which beauty weaves around itself, but also pregnant with the old and shadowy threatenings of sorrow and decay. The world has grown very sad since she has multiplied in her wisdoms. There is something very sorrowful in the sight of a human being so utterly unaware of what things life may have one day in store for it. But with her, one quite lost sight of this ; she seemed only to require time to ripen into some sinister but beautiful flower—loving and beloved by some ; but perilous, ill-meaning, and misunderstood in its relation to others.

Sometimes under the impulse of any slight momentary excitement, little childishly-tender teeth, whiter than ivory, glistened through her dark gipsy lips, giving to her mobile countenance an involuntary expression, which would have made any one start who had been watching her without expecting it. Her limbs never were quiet for one instant, she was perpetually in motion ; her life seemed to dance and vibrate through her lithe little frame like the flickering reflections of the sunbeams cast up from the eddies in the running water, and quivering over the grey meagre trunks and on the green leaves of the trees, or shooting up and down in the blue shadows of the high rocks whose edges she so fearlessly balanced herself on.

Through this desolate solitude of trees, rocks, and falling water, the child appeared to be thoughtlessly rambling. She was accompanied by a weird-looking grey cat, just emerging from kittenhood, not yet grown dignified or lazy enough to be capable of resisting such allurements as were

presented to its youthful feline nature by chasing and capturing the quick grasshoppers, or the gilded flies, buzzing over the grass and in and out of the speckled sunshine. It was very singular to watch them both together.

At intervals some grey rabbit or squirrel might show itself, glancing indolently at them over the stones and leaves; then if their quick eyes noticed it they both gave chase, either with an unpreconcerted and sudden rush which scared the animal in an instant, or with more caution by stealthily crawling towards it on the ground. The child, creeping silently and courting the shelter of the long tufts of grass, seemed to act as much from the impulse of instinct as the cat itself; it was marvellous to watch the perfect understanding which seemed to exist between them. At such moments one seemed hardly less excited or nimble than the other.

The luminous eyeballs, inflated nostrils, contracted irises, lithesome supple movements, and tenacious distended claws, of the feline animal seemed reproduced in the eyes, fingers, and limbs, of the child, to a degree, which was almost repulsive and terrible in a human being.

Neither of them was successful, however. After these failures the animal, writhing in and out of the girl's feet while she stood still, seemed to talk and purr as though it were convinced its mistress understood its inarticulate language, and was probably endeavouring to encourage her to fresh exertions. It had very large erect ears and a long thin tail, and followed at her feet ceaselessly, occasionally stopping to roll over in the grass, or gnaw at the stalks.

Sometimes the child threw herself indolently down on the ground, basking heedlessly in the warmth of one of the

slanting sunbeams ; then the cat would mount demurely on her prostrate limbs, its thin fur glowing in the sunshine, while it sat crouched up and purring with evident self-satisfaction, until the nuisance occasioned by the energy and pleasure with which it stretched and contracted its sharp claws became too much to bear, and it was shaken off.

It would be impossible to delineate how marvellously graceful and graciously animal-like this strange child's actions became at times. Once she sprang up and jumped fleetly along the side of a rock, over-hanging a deep pool in the stream, her body seeming buoyant as a wind-driven feather, her crisp dark-brown eastern cloud of hair floating over her forehead and shoulders. There she sat down swaying to and fro, with her brown delicate hands clasped over her knees.

Then, as though purely inspired by the warmth of the sun, just as a young bird might be, she began singing snatches of songs ; set now and then to meaningless inaudible words of her own. Her cat meanwhile rubbed its long ears and head insidiously against her ankles and feet, as it lay by her side panting with the exertions it had made to reach the summit first. But after a while, as the noisy contention of the water was stilled for a few moments, the child's shrill sweet voice was, one might say, revealed among the pauses ; so that she could be heard singing the detached lines of some strange monotonous melody, which would have filled any listener with surprise who could have heard it issuing clearly from her lips.

The words were composed, not in the English, but in the Zingali dialect ; probably in its most ancient character, but they had been modified by the Spanish associations of

the tribes it had come from, till they must have lost much of their original form. How she could have learnt them might seem a mystery, for, despite the undefined oriental expression in her face, she was undoubtedly English as far as her dress could show. Sitting as she was among the mis-shapen rocks, the wild song seemed to invest the quaint queer little singer with an almost inexplicable charm and poetry, for its weirdly pronounced guttural sounds were very soft and melodious. By the way she uttered them, fusing the different syllables together, it appeared questionable whether she could really understand their hidden meaning.

Those gracious lips, burnt red by the sun, which had first learnt to pronounce them in the sultry splendour of the eastern climes they had issued from, had long since been silenced ; even the very dust the limbs of the singers had dissolved into must have perished and been drawn up and reinhaled into fresh flesh and blood, which had itself perished again. The disused vital forces of their souls might even now be suffused among the gusts of wind which blew about the unconscious child's tangles of hair ; for it was one of those songs which are handed down through remote long centuries from generation to generation ; dying away from echo to echo fainter and fainter, as it were a voice among the mountains. There is nothing more saddening than the pleasure given by an old melody ; one knows not what long-passionless hearts may once have been inspired with rapture over its still undiminished sweetness : but indeed there are very few things in this world which are utterly unmixed with any suggestion of the final mystery of our existences.

At last, sitting there and looking up the opposite bank of the stream, she sang the whole right through, just at a time in which one might have heard it entirely without hindrance or interruption, for it happened during one of the periodical pauses in the fitful clamour of the water, which lasted longer than usual. There could be no reason for my giving the original song as it came from her tongue, and I have roughly translated it here, trying to preserve the full significance of its simplicity, as well as I might. While it lasted there seemed to be a magic pause come over the swift channel of the stream (probably some large mass of earth had fallen off the banks higher up and dammed up the course of the current for a brief while). In this interlude the pure childish unhesitating voice could be heard dying away in the distance, undisturbed by any noise save the soft mysterious undertone still kept up like a lingering echo among the rocks.

“I love very well
The first blossoming.
(I love well I ween)
That blooms in the spring ;
Its purple and green
Seem meet for some queen,
To bind in her hair’s loosening.

“I should love well to match me !
(The light of high heaven
Burns in my eyes !)
And I love well,” she cries,
“The young men to watch me.
But, ah ! who can catch me ?
For I run with feet fleeter than wind through the skies.”

As the last strange words parted from her lips, the

monotonous unequal dashing of the water was resumed ; it seemed as though, with the end of the song, the magic spell which had held the stream silent had failed.

Almost simultaneously she made a sudden spring from where she was sitting, and sprang up unconsciously into such a perilous position that for one moment she seemed quite to hang over the precipice of the rock as the bough of a tree might. Gazing down intently and curiously into the dark boiling lines of the cataract which surged and seethed by under her feet, all flecked with white and yellow particles of decayed foam, she seemed for some seconds as though she were seeking for the reflection of her face in them. Then, satisfied with her inspection, she recovered herself lightly, as though she had been blown back by the slight breath of wind which then blew past her, and she danced down on to a narrow strip of ground that lay between the rocks and the swift water. The cat, which during the little time she was singing appeared to have seized the opportunity to take a short nap, still accompanied her assiduously, though it seemed by its actions to dread the spurts of mist-like spray, scattered constantly in its direction. At last it set its paw right on a drop of water and sprang back up the rock, shuddering through all its meagre limbs, and lay there, watching its mistress as she bent low down balancing herself over the stream, holding negligently with her hands and leaning her head forwards while she drank from the clear deep eddies under the bank. Some of the mazy clusters of her hair fell over her forehead into the current ; and this, in the force with which it swept onward, uncoiled the curls, and drew them out to their furthest limits.

Then, when her thirst was appeased, she got up and came back; having scooped up some of the dripping liquid in the palms of her hands, out of which the animal drank eagerly. Suddenly, while licking the last drops out of her fingers, it pricked up its long ears and began staring hard in one direction, through the disorderly entanglement of branches, as though the spirit of one of its departed ancestors had been revealed to it.

CHAPTER III.

ATROPA BELLADONNA.

Its mistress, following the lynx-like glance of its scintillating eye-balls, caught sight of two figures, slowly descending the incline of the wood, and coming towards her over the uncertain soil. One was an elderly-looking man with a worn, wrinkled face and stooping shoulders; the other a child of about her own age.

The man was dressed in an old-fashioned costume that might have been in vogue some forty years before; a long grey coat, a waistcoat with large pockets protected by lappets, a plain soft shirt-ruff (the folds of which bore signs as of snuff on them), white wristbands which came out under his coat-sleeve, grey worsted stockings, and square-toed shoes. This was once a common-place costume enough; but it was now utterly out of fashion, and by no means commonly to be met with, even among the most secluded of the country gentlemen.

It is said amongst artists that one of the peculiarities of this costume was that it never looked awkward, no matter whose figure it might clothe ; yet it hardly seemed to become this man's stooping form. He wore a large flat cap, such as one sometimes sees in the old portraits, the three black over-hanging flaps of which shaded his worn face from the sun whenever its gleams penetrated through the leaves on to his head. His grey hair was fastened back off his forehead with black ribbon, in a disorderly queue ; his eyes were sunken deep under his hairy brows, and seemed to have a kind of burnt-out glow lingering about them ; the pupils were so like two dying embers that one might have expected to see their dull lustre rekindle again whenever the wind blew upon them. The brown skin was shrunken and wrinkled round their lids, and there was a hollow indentation under each brow. The whole face might have been called undersized ; the nose and nostrils were small and delicately shaped, the mouth too was small and thin—in this he resembled the child who was watching him,—it was drawn into a half-pained expression, which seemed to fluctuate between timidity and sternness. He was closely shaven, excepting for a slight grey line of whisker just in front of his ear, joining with his hair and extending slightly down his jaw ; the cheek-bone was high and prominent, and the face sunken underneath. If one could have examined the skin closely, one would have seen the same little wrinkles extending everywhere through its surface.

The whole figure had an air of reticence and shrinking about it which was almost painful. It seemed as though at some no very distant period he must have suffered under

some severe mental blow, from the lingering effects of which he could never recover, until the burthen of his life should be relieved. I do not mean that he seemed conscious that his life was not enjoyable to him; he appeared to be far too absent-minded for that, it might be no exaggeration to say. He constantly walked with his head bowed down and his hands clasped behind his back: altogether one of those sedentary, morbid men, the first impression created by whose personal appearance can never be erased or forgotten. It does not often happen that one meets casually with men of this stamp in the course of one's lifetime; if one does, their unconscious eccentricities are the very reverse of laughable. The time of his life might fairly have been between forty-five and sixty; what it really was would have been impossible to tell.

Just as the child leaning over the rock by the water-side first caught sight of him, the whole listless apathetic expression of his face changed to something well-nigh resembling a tinge of satisfaction or pleasure; and she saw him stoop down over a large mis-shapen fragment of quartz, or basalt, a dark stone half concealed under a coating of grey and green mosses, now lit up by a warm gleam which shot upon it from the declining sun. Examining it with his fingers, and pinching the holes worn on the outside with his thumb-nail, he sat down on its edge, producing a hammer, such as might be used by a geologist, out of his spacious coat-pocket. One side of this hammer was a magnet-stone; she knew it well, having often coveted its possession.

The cat meanwhile, seemingly satisfied that they were

friends, had given up its earnest inspection of them, and was rubbing its cold nose against her chin and neck and purring vehemently. In spite of this, it gave a low growl of evident displeasure, when the little girl who was with this eccentric man suddenly turned round and calling out "Yelen! (Helen)" came running down towards them. It seemed to entertain some grudge against her.

"Hot yare tha dawin' dawn there, Nelly?" she panted in the broadest Devonian and with a slight stammer. "Nurse Margery's beed out lookin' vor tha'; sh' says tha'st hed no luncheon to yeat nor drink!"

"Hot's that to her?" said the one addressed as Nelly, curtly and impolitely, and with a cynical emphasis on the first word, for the difference between their pronunciation was very marked. The cat leapt on to her shoulder and crouched round the back of her neck, among the profuse curls, still drawing its lips back over its white teeth and looking at the new-comer with spiteful eyes. It was by no means an over good-tempered animal to any one but its mistress, evidently.

"Ay, well it's nuthin' to ma an' it baint suthin' to tha," stuttered the other. "I wish they'd gie thy cat ter th' butcher, ter naup and ping loose ower the moor-yavils out there, or ter be flung inter th' mere-rixen, th' gurt puzzum-ful grizzeler. Sh's bud at the chicks again!" and so saying she retired up the bank shaking her head ominously, as though that piece of intelligence boded no good to Nelly or her favourite.

"I'll ping them loose over the heaths after her and among the rushes in the mere-side too, if they *dare* do anything of the sort!" exclaimed Nelly, as, wild with

indignation at such an unheard of proposition, she climbed over the stones following her gracious friend. Thus amicably conferring with each other, they both came up the bank to where the seeming geologist was absorbed, still chipping at the stone.

The particles he knocked out of it sparkled with unexpected brightness as they met the sunlight; he now began to examine them with a magnifying glass, while they both stood watching him silently; Nelly looking keenly in his absent-minded face, the other at his operations. Presently he looked up and saw them both standing there; he seemed to think and struggle to recollect for a moment, then said slowly as though he were troubled with some impediment in his speech, "O Nelly . . . I believe . . . at least I think . . . yes, I *must* have heard Margery's voice calling you about the house . . . I thought she was telling me you must have fallen into . . . or been dragged down . . . one . . . of . . . the . . . stre . . ."

There his nervous voice paused, nor did he utter another syllable; but, resuming his occupation with the same half-mechanical interest, he took no further notice of them.

In addition to his other peculiarities he seemed to be very short or weak sighted; for everything not looked at through the glass, had to be held close up to his eyes. In a while he took out a pair of horn spectacles—apparently by mistake—from one of his pockets, and, after looking closely all over them in evident uncertainty what to do, he put them on, then looked up for an instant as though half alarmed at the abrupt dispersal of the clouds of mist which hung before his eyes; the mist which shrouded his

faculties of observation seemed as though it would have been more difficult to dispel.

Helen meanwhile muttered in a grumbling tone to herself and in a somewhat illogical fashion, "I'm sure I'm no more likely to tumble in than she is, and I'm not always worrying her about it."

The other hearing her speak, and only half comprehending her meaning, rejoined, "Sh' says thad'st henn thysel' in ony ter chaunt she, an nif she but tak's owl o't wi' 'tha!"* to which Helen returned no audible answer, though her eyes gleamed spitefully, like the cat's which still clung on her shoulder.

There certainly existed as little affinity between these two children as could exist. The one was all life and vivacity, and as nimble as the animal on her shoulder; the other seemed dull and quiet, and though her face was pleasing at first sight as the other's was perplexing, yet if one looked hard at them both it would have been seen that the repellent expression, which under inspection died out of the face of one, seemed to reassert itself in the features of the other, and in a manner by no means diminished in the exchange. She had blond Saxon hair cut rather short, deep-blue sleepy-looking eyes, and pouting red lips; a face which bore a kind of half-selfish, half-childish, but decidedly malicious look about it; the other was a gipsy in every feature, though to speak the truth she did not seem deficient in spitefulness herself. Now that she was in company with these two, the half-bitter

* She says you'd leap in, only to spite her, if she but disagrees with you.

look I have alluded to, as coming over her lips every now and then, seemed confirmed on them.

Both appeared to be about the same age; both were dressed in black—a colour which looks very sinister and mournful on young children; but they could no more have been twin sisters than the summer rain have been sister to the winter wind; they must have differed as much in temperament from each other as the tropical ocean does from the waters of the frigid zone.

Just at this moment a deep gust of wind, fragrant with heather, from across the hills, swept down through the wood, blowing the foliage together and swaying the branches from side to side. Sweeping past these figures, it blew Nelly's hair all over her face and caused her to shake the cat off her shoulders. It so happened that the long curled shoot of a well-known poison-plant, called in Devonshire the “Dwale Bluth,” was caught up, lifted, and blown round the side of a large rock near them, where it remained, bright with the allurement of the sunlight, and quivering in the embrace of the breeze. Just as its intensely blue flowers and half-developed berries attracted their notice, it receded again as if insidiously luring them to follow it; which they both did with eager emulation, while the cat joined in the chase too, though without appearing to understand what they were running after.

They found a single spray coiling and curling up the side; Nelly for all her agility failed to reach it first; the other plucked it and clasped the flowers anxiously in her bosom. But Helen with her dark hair and flashing eyes, after finding no more was left on the ground, snatched it

away in an instant. Blind with rage the other began crying out,

“Thou’dst no warn’t ter tak’t wis me ; I’d gat th’ vedge an’ nif I daunt pilk tha’!” and so ran at her with lifted hands. But Helen eluded her, and finding it impossible to carry out her intentions with regard to “pilking,” she cried, “I’ll let thy uncle knew, Nelly Serpleton.”

“Tell him, little tittle-goose! What’s it matter to me? I meant to have it. Look under your feet, there’s some white-smocks and sproil only waiting to be pulled—they must suit you just as well. Why *can’t* you be good-tempered?” This last sentence was delivered in a tone of deep lamentation.

But unreconciled by the intensity of this appeal to her better feelings, or by the generous offer of the couch-grass and wild convolvulus “waiting to be pulled,” the angry child ran up to her father, and pulling at the skirts of his coat violently, till she attracted his self-absorbed attention, at last received an intimation not to bother ; but in spite of the almost diplomatic coldness of this reception she told him of her wrong, and pointed to the stolen flowers.

“Divide them in half,” said he, perhaps with some dim consciousness of the Biblical legend, when he found what was wanted (no easy task, for her voice was less distinguishable than usual, owing to the sobs it was broken with). “Come here . . . Helen . . . your . . . cousin says you’re ill-treating her.”

The little plunderer stood at a distance, looking consciously guilty, and a most singular aspect of derision mingled with spite stole into her subtle features and dark

eyes ; but she came immediately to his side and the cat came with her.

“ What does she say you are quarrelling over, Helen ? ” he asked, but his attention was evidently beginning to recede again.

Helen held up the plant, while he examined it with a sudden revival of interest. The green leaves threw a malicious-looking reflection in the concave glasses of his spectacles.

“ *Solanum dulcama* . . . no . . . *atropa belladonna*. You mustn’t play with that ; even the animals avoid it. Throw it away, child, throw it away. No . . . give it me.”

“ Why does he always call me a child ? I’m not like *her*, and there can’t be two kinds ! ” said the child to herself impatiently, while her uncle was examining the plant.

“ Look here, Nelly, and you too, Leah ; they call this the deadly night-shade sometimes. You must never disturb it, or it will send you to sleep so soundly that you won’t be able to wake up again. It’s poison, mark you ! ”

Leah shuddered childishly and seemed to recede from the place where she plucked it, rubbing her small hands and fingers on her smock. Helen, who had remained silent during this slowly and painfully delivered dialogue, merely looked with deep curiosity on the leaves which hung out of the pocket he had placed the plant in when he had ceased speaking. Had he thrown it away at once, as he should have done, much of this narrative would have remained unwritten.

Apparently out of bravado the child stretched out her ten fingers (which, by the bye, were not over clean already), and touched the leaves with them, and then

having contaminated them sufficiently, put them all to her dark-red lips. What her object could be was inconceivable.

Leah merely nodded her head, and remarked with more real penetration than one would have expected from her (though children among themselves realize each other's dispositions far better than we can), "Ay! ay! it's th' very daps o' tha'!"*

The Rev. Oliver Serpleton had forgotten all about them by this time, and was making Latin notes in a pocket-book with a pencil. "Quî fit," he wrote interrogatively, "ut inter granitica saxa, per quæ fluit Teignas, positus sit basaltes niger? An dicemus eum (basaltem) flumine devectum?"

His brain seemed quite clear enough for work of that description, and he was undoubtedly a very good scholar; one of those abstruse men with whom the concentration of the powers of the mind on one object (often perhaps to escape the affliction which fills up the intervals of forgetfulness) has been indulged in till it has grown into a disease. One might, at times, have taken him for an opium-eater: a mental opium-eater he certainly was. Cavendish, the celebrated chemist, who first analysed water, a being of extraordinary genius and eccentricity, was well known as a man of this strange order. The power of mental abstraction increases naturally with age.

At length a few heavy drops of rain falling on the leaves caused him to close the book hastily and utter an inarticulate exclamation; then he started up in a spasmodic manner,

* It's just what one might have expected from you.

and began to move off up the bank in the direction of the house which bore his name. Presumably he acted thus from the warning he had received by seeing his writing blotted, but he made no effort to show this; any one watching him would rather have supposed him to have forgotten something which he remembered, and was now returning to fetch. A snuff-box which he had placed on the stone beside him, and had used more than once, was left behind; but Nelly, noticing this, caught it up and dropped it into his pocket without his knowledge.

The mind of a man like this might almost be said to resemble an autumnal evening mist in which no object is distinctly visible, save the irradiating luminous spot where the disk of the declining sun shines through. The old servant who lived with him (and sometimes scolded him soundly for his negligence) might be considered to have most explicitly described his character when she explained in strict confidence to one of her seldom-seen gossips that his brain “wert a’ sproiled ower an’ rustled up wi’ unswept cobwebs.”

So the reverend clergyman strode hastily along, while his little daughter grasped the skirt of his coat to keep by his side, and Helen lingered behind with her cat. As they neared the thin edge of the wood, the scattered groups of gnarled oaks grew wider apart, and the ground between became covered with brown heather and fluttering feathery gorse. Every now and then some swift wind-driven cloud passed before the sun, obstructing its light, and throwing a dull disenchantment of shadow on the radiant foliage beneath,—the atmosphere was growing almost oppressive in its sultriness, and the rain-drops had ceased. A

clamorous lingering flight of black-winged crows gathered and paused awhile, far up in the sky, whirling in circles halfway between the grey drifting clouds and the grim sea-like expanse of wood-foliage beneath, as though undecided whether to separate again and finish the day's labour or not. Then instinctively they swept off homewards in a desultory line, blown hither and thither, beating against the high wind, and emitting wild cries of warning to distant stragglers.

The irregular foot-path all over-tangled with brambles, whose course these three were following, seemed to lead straight out towards the house, the white-walled exterior of which I have described ; presently while hurrying along they came in sight of it, looming from the dark hillside through the branches and trunks of the trees which intercepted the view. The heathery heights and receding summits of the bleak Dartmoor tors had all become most intensely purple and black, as, just visible from here, their grand outlines rose against the distant sky. The grey clouds were still seen advancing in stormy irregularity up the way of the wind, which, grown chilly now, blew right down the steep incline full in their faces. In consequence of this, they lost hearing of the dull mysterious intonation of the rapid torrents. The first few drops of the coming rain, glittering still with the sunlight, began to be whirled sibilantly through the wind-whispering leaves and in their faces ; some of them caught and glistened prettily, like dew-drops or diamonds, in Helen's hair, as it floated lightly behind her. They now reached and emerged on to the expanse of moorland which lay triangularly between

the two wooded streams, where the white house stood sheltered under the hill at the widest end of it.

The poor cat, trotting assiduously with short unequal jumps at Nelly's feet, seemed by far the most dissatisfied of the party: every now and then it growled in a low tone, while looking up in the child's face it seemed to inquire what it had been brought out in such weather as this for. She presently stooped down and took the animal up in her arms to appease it, but it still continued growling at intervals.

CHAPTER IV.

* * * *

BEFORE they where halfway across the moor, the rain began to sweep down slantingly in a perfect deluge; the Rev. Mr. Serpleton stopped for an instant, and leant down, taking his own child up in his arms, and exclaimed, "It's raining, Helen! Dear me! you must not get wet, child; let me hold you."

Then happening to glance for an instant at her face, he saw who it was and corrected himself, "Oh! it is you! Dear me!" He paused for a second, then with his body and head and shoulders all bent over from the effort, he began to run with his whole strength, leaving Nelly and her cat to follow at will. Finding that she was left alone, she began to dance round and round in the pelting rain, as though she thought she were not sufficiently wet already;

looking like some little beautiful bright-eyed imp, while the cat, with its bad temper thoroughly roused at last, continued to growl audibly and fiercely in unavailing remonstrance.

Meanwhile a singular kind of white mist, exhaling slowly from the rain-drenched soil, began completely to obscure and change the aspect of the land around her. Looking back she saw it clinging amongst the dripping foliage, and round the damp trunks of the wood she had just quitted ; over the high ridge of Watern Tor it could be seen mounting against the drifting sky, and blown away by the wind as fast as it rose ; and it even began to ascend all round her in detached evil-looking patches, as though it were obeying some silent incantation pronounced inwardly by the restless child, with her eager earnest face and vigilant glittering eyes. At length, in spite of the rain which strove to drive it down again, it rose and expanded till it was too high for her to look over ; then it remained stationary. She was literally running between the writhing walls of mist ; and, what was more, was running in the opposite direction to that which the others had taken. All this time the rain continued heavily, and the cat at intervals gave snarling tokens of acute indignation.

She still kept running round in circles, receding further and further ; turning round at last to look where the others were, she was just in time to see her uncle's strange figure half running, half walking, as it plunged into and disappeared through a puffed-up clot of vapour which overhung the path. Then she began to dance on sideways in the way children do, singing occasional snatches of her wild gipsy song ; the weird tones of its language strangely

in accordance with the rugged wildness of the scenery which surrounded her.

“ La chenda di clais
Andre mi claise ! ”

The pure voice mingled sweetly in the weltering dash of the rain, and floated along the solid sides of the clots of mist, as it recommenced over and over again with some separate verse.

“ Camela, Camela !
La bastarda brohjugi
Camela Camela !
Di brotomuchi.”

Hugging her cat in her arms and moving where she listed, she seemed like some wild animal in a condition of unconscious ecstasy and delight with the limitlessness of its freedom—its joy uncloyed by any earthly thought or sorrow.

An enormous impenetrable rain-cloud had drifted over the face of the sun ; it was all black and lowering, but its large transparent rims, constantly writhing and changing shape before the wind, were fringed as though with bright flames : it was the largest in the sky. The remainder of the firmament was all obscurely occupied by wildly empurpled fragments of sombre vapour, diversified now and then with a blacker and heavier mass than usual—some with torn and shattered edges, others dense and solid. A most wild and tumultuous embattlement seemed perpetually going on among them—a struggle for existence as it were, while the larger and more magnetic clouds sucked in and absorbed the less predominant or powerful ones.

Once or twice an unhindered ray of the sun pierced through some forgotten crevice, striking one of the sombre hills with a sudden flash of light ; but this did not recur.

The cloud-rack at last grew dim and blind all over, and the sunlight died out from the edges of the cloud which principally obscured it. At last a brilliant flash of white sinister light leapt out and flickered blindingly round the zenith from cloud to cloud, and for less than an instant the pelting rain seemed turned into a bright swift shower of pallid flame ; then the shadow and sombreness predominated again, and an ominous hush fell everywhere. But just in the intense silence, the child's irrepressible song,

“ La bastarda brohjugi
Di bro—”

was interrupted by the booming vibration of an answering peal of thunder, which slowly gathering in force seemed to cause the whole of the solid atmosphere of the heavens to shake with anticipation.

The rain quivered from side to side in its ceaseless fall ; and the white fog, crawling over the damp ground, sank down trembling, as though, instead of an inanimate substance merely affected by the reverberation of the air in which it hung, it was some cowardly animal crouching with fear. The huge clouds in the sky seemed to blow asunder one from another, when the “*profondeur*” of the final crash burst through them : then the deep broken rumbling died slowly away ; half-drowned in the inexplicable confusion of the echoing it awakened in the surrounding hills.

After a time a sudden silence concealed the traces of this wild disorder, just as the waves grow smooth over an agitated place in the sea. It was broken only by the deep, savage and wailing gusts of wind which began to sweep the mis-shapen mists along the rough inequalities of the ground, and joined them one with another, so as to obscure and blow over Helen's lifted face and figure as she stood gazing straight up at the terrible clouds.

One might have thought that the resolute heart of the little figure, muffled up in the fog below, would have been silenced if not terrified by the confusion in the clouds and atmosphere overhead; but instead of this she merely waited till the silence came, and then began singing the interrupted line over again, as if nothing had happened. Fancy the shrill piercing voice of a child trying to compete with the muttering of thunder,

“tomuchi
Clonel e badnoy.”

Then she stopped to address the cat, which had given up growling in order to howl out loud in a dolorous fashion more characteristic of its feline nature; in fact, in the way all cats do when left out without protection in the rain.

“Come, mistress puss! Don’t shake like a d . . . d . . . d . . . jelly—little silly cross-patch—and don’t dig your claws into my arms. That’s not what they’re meant for!” Helen had an evident difficulty in pronouncing some of the more intricate of the words wherewith she adorned her infantine vocabulary, but she fought manfully against it.

Just as she spoke the mist began to separate again, so

that it revealed her form bending over, as she spoke, to change the arm she held the cat by.

The amiable animal to which this perfectly grave exhortation was addressed spat and hissed violently in her face by way of answer, and made a fierce effort to clutch the delicate bistre-coloured skin of her neck with its distended claws, which she eluded. It seemed quite gone out of its mind with fright; or else to think that its little mistress was personally responsible for the tempest which had thus burst upon them, and would require strong measures to intimidate her. Now it was a singular thing that Helen never once seemed to think that there was anything not right in such conduct, or that it was reprehensible in any way. She placed the animal quietly over her other arm, and never relinquished her hold. Nor did the cat seem really to wish to leave her (although it hung nearly doubled in two over her elbow, while the rain dripped off the end of its tail); but for these occasional ebullitions of temper it remained quite passive and docile.

CHAPTER V.

* * * *

THE rain began falling afresh in heavy incessant torrents, and the wind blew wildly through in a deep gust which overwhelmed the vapour again, and set it all in motion so as to reconcile them. Helen followed the direction it swept in, singing and springing over the rough furze-covered

ground, as though she were blown along with it herself, and the mechanism of her throat were set in motion like an *Æolian* harp. It became at last noticeable that she sang best whenever the wind blew loudest.

Wonderful it would have been to note the alterations in the forms and colours of the sombre swollen cloud-masses overhead ; some of them coal-black and lowering, but with bright edges, some dull, heavy, and white ; it was from these that the rain came. Others were torn up into little sinister-looking purple fragments : but in all this stupendous accumulation of atmospheric vapours, there was no gap anywhere ; all the particles were driven up and compressed together. Midway between land and cloud a transparent blue vapour, like smoke, was driven hither and thither, swirling about in the wind,—the thin mist deposited by such clouds as had already dissolved into the rain.

Some fearful tempest seemed brewing and simmering up among the angry heavens. It was “conjurin’ time,” as the ignorant peasants who watched it from the moors would have said among themselves.*

* An old superstition current among them, not many years before this was written, was that, whenever a thunder-storm took place, it was caused by argumentation (or even personal combat) between the clergyman of some distant parish and the arch-fiend Satan. Whenever the “conjuring” of the zealous parson had need, for lack of breath, to come to a full-stop, the sexton cried “Amen!” Then it lightened and the foul fiend would give vent to his unsupportable emotion in short or prolonged howls, just as circumstances might induce his offended dignity to require ; for, as is well known, it was morally and physically impossible for him to edge in a single word while the worthy minister’s Christian fortitude held out, and the clerk thus nobly supported his spiritual pastor and master.

Generally speaking Satan was worsted, and took refuge in flight,

All the hollows of the land underneath, and all the vast extent of hills around, were dark with indigo and deep purple shadow, thrown and reflected from the sky above. At length the incessant wind seemed to have no further influence over the formation of the solidified clouds, although it was so harsh that the very rain served to soften it.

Again, a blinding flicker of violet-coloured lightning lit up in most profound silence the gloomy and awful grandeur of the heavens. But this time the wild rain and still wilder wind made no pause of anxious expectancy, when the low lingering vibration of the answering thunder peal commenced ; although its final crash was so powerful and sudden that it would have even made the preceding one mute. But the stolidity of the earth itself seemed shaken when a large serpentine flicker of electricity, detaching itself from a swollen black cloud overhead and darting about among the others (attracted for a moment perhaps by superior magnetic power), fell unexpectedly and with incredible swiftness into the mist, scattering a large spiral whirl of it from over the spot where the child must have been standing just before, and perhaps might have been standing then. There was a slight smell as of singeing, which rose for an instant, but the predominating scent of the rain, pelting down pitilessly, soon destroyed it, and the wind drove the disturbed mist up together, while the vibrations of a third peal of thunder were flung reverberating from cloud to cloud across the whole extent of

though well authenticated instances have undoubtedly occurred in which the wily enemy of God carried his reverend opponent home under his wing, or even contented himself with the truly unfortunate clerk.

the skies, and even back again ; like the enraged growlings of a disappointed lion, whose victim has eluded him among the rocks he has pursued it into.

It was an inthralling and terrible scene, more especially as one thinks of the danger the weirdly fearless little human being must have passed through, when the lightning plunged into the mist around her ;—what had become of her after that it was impossible to tell.

But even now the storm began to waver and shift swiftly away to the north ; and its strength overhead perceptibly diminished, and grew less violent. The sky had made a determined but futile stand against the tyranny of the wind, but it was now defeated and driven on as before. A little glimmering of light—a tender reminiscence of the sun—stole faintly into the southern heaven, and the gloomy empurpled outline of Watern Tor opposite grew paler against the grey storm-rack behind it. Several angry outbursts of thunder sounded again, each further away than the other, and following at longer and longer intervals on the flashes of lightning which constantly illuminated the distant clouds. The white walls of Serpleton House at the hill's base were wet and shining, and the water ran in streams off the waste-pipes at the projecting corners of its roof ; falling into the great round barrels always placed in readiness to collect it : this made a sort of desolate dripping noise, audible all round. The windows were totally dark—save two ; one where a lamp burned feebly as though a student were there, and another at the back basement, the small panes of which glowed with fire-light.

Suddenly in the tangled bushes of the garden and in the dark dripping foliage of the great elm, the multitude of

birds collected for shelter burst wildly, one after another, into song ; and one could tell, from the places all round the house into which the singing spread, that they were beginning to disperse, as though knowing the tempest was ended.

A wonderful calm and silence always follows these stormy vicissitudes of Nature ; the stillness which had fallen everywhere was quite undisturbed, save by the shrill singing of the birds, and by the dripping of the rain off the leaves, as they weltered one over another ; the drooping wild-flowers in the garden seemed to brighten and be revivified slowly. Miles off in the dim distance down the valley, the receding thunder boomed and pealed sullenly among the crags and clouds, in answer to the vacillatory glitter of the nimble lightning ; but overhead the sky was pure blue, everywhere the cool fragrant smell of the fallen rain penetrated,—for the breaking of the storm had rendered the sultry air wonderfully buoyant and invigorating again.

Some of the still undispersed mist which lay before the house had even stolen over the crumbling garden-walls, and lay dissolving in wreaths across its tangled walks ; but the vapour was thinning rapidly on the expanse of moor in front. Inside the dry porch an elderly country-woman, whom I have described before, was standing, thrusting her head out occasionally ; when the rain had quite ceased she stepped out from under its shelter. First she carefully slipped an awkward pair of pattens on her feet ; then somewhat raised in altitude, and holding the short skirts of her petticoats in her hands to keep them off the wet ground, with the back of her dress turned over her head, she went

to the gate. She stood there looking anxiously round into the sinking mist; muttering at times half angrily to herself.

"Drat the childer!" she said out loud with indignant emphasis. "Eh! hare sher cumes at learst; loitering-louching vrough th' rag an' reek, an' in a vine plight i' th' bargan, chell warndy!*" Th' little doiling crock!" So saying she opened and forced the creaking gate back as far as its rusty hinges would permit it to go, and retreated back on to the dry red bricks of the porch.

A little poignant-eyed figure, with a dark guilty face, came nearer and nearer till the mist only clung halfway up about her body; presently she passed in between the brick portals of the entrance. Then it could be seen that her little black dress, her still blacker hair, her face, hands and arms—everything about her in fact (excepting the bright dark eyes, which flashed with defiant distrustfulness as they fell upon the person of her nurse) was limp, dripping, and drenched with rain. A grey speckled cat she held in her arms jumped out of them suddenly as she approached, and sprang into the entrance; and in spite of the zealous efforts made by the old servant to frustrate its "dampingness," made good its way on to the polished reflecting tiles of the passage. A dripping trail of moisture betrayed every place in which it set its feet, the whole way through the basement of the house; till it reached and crouched down panting on the clean white hearth, in front of the kitchen-fire, diffusing a damp patch of moisture all round it, on the absorbing whitening of the stone. The large

* Chell warndy, I'll warrant.

black cat its mother, after advancing eagerly to welcome the prodigal, started back in utter dismay at its dismal condition, and discreetly laid aside all present ebullitions of maternal solicitude.

Meanwhile Helen, arrived right in front of the door, stood surveying the astonished, not to say indignant countenance of her nurse, in a cool cold-blooded fashion that appeared not a little to increase that worthy woman's perplexity. She was evidently, however, too much relieved at finding her little charge to manifest any but counterfeit anger; it could be seen now that her own dress was wet with rain, as though she had been out looking for Helen already, before the storm had ceased.

"Well?" said Helen deliberately as Margery Wilmot still stood looking at her with lifted hands and open eyes; no doubt seeking some string of words sufficiently strong to give expression to her unutterable feelings, or perhaps in the vain hope of awing the child into some vague appearance of submission.

"Well!" ejaculated the nurse slowly and emphatically, "*I nary did!* It's over-wull, indeed it be! *But ter tell nae clinchers an' shearman ter stroil o' th' dowl, missy, a' daunt reckon it wull at aw,—an' gnif tha uncle chout ha'ap tha avore long, a' daunt knew hot 'ull happen ter tha—lackeening indel an' ondel ruze th' contrazide vro' cock-leart ter dimmet, ye little wild-drive! Come in wi' ye th' yinstant!" she added with a stamp of her foot.

* But to tell no untruths and shame the vigilance of the Devil, miss, I don't reckon it well at all,—and unless your uncle should pull you up before long, I don't know what 'll happen to you—loitering in and out the country-side from cock's crow to sun-set, you little mad-cap.

Then stooping down she disencumbered herself of the pattens, and, arranging her dress, took the wayward child's hands into her own—not unkindly however—and pulled her inside the passage, still looking on her face in strange perplexity and despair. Helen maintained an obstinate silence.

At last, just before closing the door, old Margery Wilmot could contain no longer her profound lamentations over the child's disordered condition—and her mingled indignation and wonder found an outlet.

“Eh zirs!” she exclaimed in her strange provincial dialect, and in a deep tone of despair, “Lock! Lock! An’ thaets aw th’ ruspec’ sher bears till her dead an’ burrit pariants *as sleep by th’ wearl yondor Limmerstones’ vera moulds hinder. T’ goa an’ git yer braw spic an’ span black mornin’ smock gerrid an’ duggletealed an’ mucked i’ thicka falshion!”

* That sleep by the wall, under Limmerstone's very moles yonder. To go and get your fine new mourning dress dirted and wet through and muddied in that way!

*BOOK III.—THE GROWTH OF
A SOUL.*

CHAPTER I.

ANTAGONISTIC NATURES.

ONE of the most singular and significant signs in little Helen Serpleton's character was the wild and apparently irrepressible craving which she displayed to be always wearing some eccentric ornament entangled in the locks of her beautiful hair. This strange desire seemed sometimes to amount to a mania.

It could hardly have been mere vanity on the part of one so young as Helen ; but, if the curled and wanton clusters which over-hung her eyes and neck had been endowed with the sensibility which existed in her very limbs, she could not have been more sensitive with regard to them. She preferred flowers ; yet she would on an emergency pick up fragments of stick, dry leaves—stones even—and wind them up in her curls, till Margery's scanty stock of patience was utterly exhausted.

Helen would not on any account submit to having her hair bound up ; she invariably pulled it down, and never seemed satisfied till she felt it hanging loose over her shoulders. Above all, to her new nurse's horror, she succeeded in obtaining some more glow-worms ; and guarded them

jealously till one unlucky evening came, in which they escaped out of the cup wherein she kept them, and thence crawled into Margery's bedroom, where—in spite of the nervous occupant's outcries—they seemingly proposed to establish themselves for the rest of their lives; and perhaps would have done so, had not their tell-tale luminosity given a clue which led to their ultimate extermination.

The next day the whole household was thrown into confusion by a violent denunciation directed against Leah by Helen, who seemed perfectly convinced that her cousin had maliciously allowed her favourites to escape. Perhaps it was in revenge for this suspected injury that the gipsy-child soon afterwards imparted to her confiding cousin a mysterious narrative concerning one "Jenny Greenteeth" by name—a sprightly but unholy personage who lay in wait "at the head of the stairs in the night and behind the mouldering parlour-tapestry by daytime;" and was always prepared, at a moment's notice, to devour children of tender years; this, no matter how great the excellency of their personal characters. The sole specific against the unnatural voracity of this eccentric lady was the sound of a song which Helen could constantly be heard singing—which, moreover, she alone could sing, for it was one which she must have learnt from her gipsy-mother. Consequently poor Leah must have been left in considerable doubt as to whether she was destined to reach the age of maturity or not.

In fact the only beings in the household with whom Helen established any real or lasting friendship were her uncle (on whose knee she would perch herself for hours together, nestling quietly with her head against his soft

shirt-ruff) and Margery's two cats, who reciprocated her many proofs of affection to an astonishing degree. Mr. Serpleton protected her from the consequences of the mischief in which she constantly indulged, and the cats did their best to lead her into it. Indeed, scarce any inducement (under that of a mouse) could have persuaded the kitten to leave her side at last; it slept with her, ate with her, accompanied her everywhere, and seemed quite to regard her in the light of an equal.

Now Helen *must* have had some particles of good in her nature, if she were not wholly immaculate like some heroines; for no one acquainted with the feline disposition could ever believe in the existence of a cat capable of forming an enthusiastic friendship with a person of utterly vitiated and unprincipled morals.

The child once found this animal in the garden, growling angrily over something which she at first mistook for a stone; but afterwards discovered to be nothing more or less than a large and venerable toad. She had probably never seen or heard of such an animal before.

At any rate this delightful beast was immediately rescued and examined with great curiosity; its ridiculous shape, cold skin, and palpitating throat, seemed to have something highly attractive to her, for she laughed over them till she nearly dropped the impassive animal into the claws of the expectant cat. At last she placed it on a large stone and bent over it to watch its movements.

It turned its clumsy feet and toes in quietly, and then sat upright with equanimity, seemingly quite undisturbed by all it had undergone; but presently it turned its flat head knowingly on one side. A fly was approaching.

The unconscious fly pursued its zigzag course, its golden scales glistening in the sunlight. Nearer and nearer! Helen's eyes glittered with excitement.

The toad's cunning gold-rimmed eyes glittered too—a white hungry streak flashed out of its distended mouth. The fly was gone, and its captor seemed undergoing a slight internal convulsion which required the immediate thrusting of his fore-paws down his capacious throat.

After this he winked in a pleasant and suggestive fashion, which can only be thoroughly appreciated by those who have watched a toad wink. The child thought he was winking right in her face—making, in fact, a sign of approval to her. This enraptured her very soul.

After winking, he commenced patting his flabby speckled stomach with both paws, for the unhappy insect was most likely tickling him. Helen grew wild with excitement and enthusiasm. She carried him in with her into the kitchen; and the cat followed them, growling with disappointment.

But to her amazement Margery no sooner saw what she held in her hand than she dropped her broom, threw her apron over her face, screamed, and scurried out of the room.

So seeing that her nurse was too narrow-minded to appreciate her last acquisition in the way of the fauna of Watern Tor, she carried the animal up to her uncle's room. Now Helen noticed that *he* was not at all frightened at it; for, on the contrary, he took the poor despised beast up in his hands and bestowed a learned Latin surname upon it.

"Child," said he, handing it carefully back to her, "what do you mean to do with this animal?"

"Keep him," said Helen.

"Very well," answered Mr. Serpleton; "but you must not hurt it...and...perhaps upon the whole...you would do best...not to show it to Margery. It *does* eat although I have heard the contrary asserted."

"He *does*!" remarked Helen.

In a short while the animal grew tame enough to delight in having its head and ears tickled with a blade of grass; and its owner did nothing but wander over the house and garden watching for flies almost as intently as it could have done itself.

But Margery never could be reconciled to its presence, and she even went so far as to complain to her master, though without avail. This offended her sense of dignity; but all she could do in her own defence was to refuse sternly to admit the abomination into her sanctuary, the kitchen. She never went to bed at night without trembling lest she should find the animal somewhere among the blankets. She seemed indeed to look upon a toad as a kind of hybrid between a viper and a scorpion.

Now the kitchen happened at that season to be fuller of flies than any other part of the house; and Helen was always doubly anxious to enter it. She simply set the old servant's behaviour down to ill-temper—to affectation, in fact—and she began perfectly to *hate* her; in the most wild and vindictive way.

The learned writer quoted by Mr. Serpleton to the effect that women are always in extremes would have been more strictly veracious if he had tried to expound the same

sentiment with regard to children instead. For *them* there is no third course ; they love or hate—but do both blindly. The most discreet child ever born never looked with indifference in a stranger's face.

Margery for her part began to regard this child as a sort of imp—one who was on the road to become even worse than her mother, whom she still remembered as a species of combination between a witch and a human being—a creature possessing all the malice of a sorceress if not the power of one.

Indeed her daughter *was* a strange child, and should have been looked after very carefully.

One of the manifold ways by which she commenced exhibiting her new-born dislike to Margery consisted in following her over the house, mocking her language. It was about the most ingenious torment which the child could possibly have devised for her.

Every single syllable which the poor woman could be induced to utter would be repeated over and over again in a hundred different ridiculous keys, till at last the nuisance became more than she could bear, and she would chase the child up and down the staircase, though always ineffectually, Helen being far fleeter of foot than she.

Her exemplary patience is however much to be commended ; for she did not once box the child's ears, though she must often have been sorely tempted to do so. Once finding her in the pursuit of one of the most glaring misdeeds she had yet been engaged in (it consisted of digging a hole in the rain-water butt, in order to enjoy the harmless diversion of dabbling her hands and face in the jet of escaping liquid), Margery locked her up in a room by

herself as a punishment. Ten minutes later, on going to note the effect it had produced on the offender, she discovered the little imp passionately endeavouring to climb through the chimney.

Helen's mimicry was wonderful ; she seemed able to amuse herself for hours by imitating different sounds. More than once she roused the jealousy of the scarlet-crested lord of the henry, by marvellously-executed imitation of his crowing, and she used apparently to converse with the cats in their own language.

Nothing audible about the house escaped her shrill mockery ; the whole place echoed with her voice, heard either in contention or in laughter and merriment. She was a singular little being. Her brain seemed literally overflowing with unutterably wild ideas and fancies, which constantly necessitated her bursting into long fits of laughter that were seemingly quite unjustified by anything around her.

The child was always severely reproved when this unseemly propensity exhibited itself in Margery's presence ; and it being one of the chief pleasures of her life to indulge in these "mental visions," and laughter being a necessary accompaniment, she got more and more to love being left alone to herself, so that she might dream away her time to her heart's content.

Helen had one peculiar gift, which was of another order of mental vision altogether—one which enabled her to see with her eyes apparently tangible forms, which had no real existence before them.

Once or twice she shocked Margery by trying to describe the things she saw in this way. The old country-

woman had no sympathy with imagination, and simply considered Helen's childishly vivid descriptions in the light of "strammers" (or lies); so she gave up talking on the subject.

But it may easily be imagined that, with a child like her, a gift of this kind became a perfect magical and secondary form of existence whenever she chose to resign herself to its involuntary conjurings.

She would call up long endless processions of dream-figures—one fading away into and recreating itself in the other, like the colours of a sunset or the clouds in a storm. She could imagine herself to be floating among wonderful flowers, whose only failing was that they emitted no fragrance. She could conjure up grotesque successions of human and animal countenances till she was too frightened to continue any longer; but, above all, one face very often haunted her—a dark-complexioned face with large flashing eyes and smiling dark-red lips—a face which always became very pitiful and sweet in expression whenever it looked at hers.

Sometimes the delusion grew so strong in the child's brain, about this face, that she would put out her lips as though half expecting to be kissed by it.

Then it passed away as suddenly as it came; and she would find herself staring against the wall, perhaps with the cat asleep in her lap, and her little feet stiff for want of employment.

She always grew very sad on these occasions.

She really seemed to learn and perfect herself in the art of singing by listening to the voices of the birds in the elm-tree, for there were nightingales down among the

woods in the valley. They used to come round the house at night, sometimes venturing into the very branches, just under and above her bedroom-window.

It is to be regretted that these birds seemed often endeavouring to set their listener a bad example by fighting and quarrelling fiercely among themselves, though on such lamentable occasions they sang sweeter than ever, sweeter and sweeter, till the child gazed out into the shadowy mysterious leaves, with her white face pressed against the cold window-panes, in a kind of ecstasy.

The cat also would leave the bed, mount the window-sill, and gaze through the misty glass with an extremely earnest expression, though, probably, it took this trouble from less æsthetical motives.

Sometimes Helen tried to imitate them ; perhaps they were jealous, for then they flew away, and she saw that she must remain quiet. She must practise by day-time, when they are not there to hear her.

Now Margery's window, round the corner of the house, also opened full into the elm-tree ; she had a soul above poetry, had Margery, and she was not bashful or reticent about admitting that fact. She was besides a light sleeper.

There can be no doubt that it must have been exceedingly aggravating to be kept awake half the night (especially when it was incumbent on one to rise at five the next morning and "stool terras"*) by the amatory and quarrelsome "hantecks" of a clique of idle, dissipated birds ; who, by rights, should have been fast asleep in their nests like other reasonable creatures.

At any rate she used to open her window with a harsh

* Set the new-cut peat out to dry in the wind and sunshine.

grating sound, clap her hands, and even throw jugs of water into the tree, till, for that time at least, the night revellers would be silenced and put to flight.

Then the lonely child would creep back into her bed, beside her slumbering cousin, with a saddened and disappointed heart, perhaps to brood over some fresh scheme of childish vengeance for the morrow.

There were extraordinary sensations soon to be blindly surging to and fro in that little palpitating heart of hers, though as yet the seal and mystery of childhood was upon her soul.

Why should she make a pet of a venomous toad? was she turning out half a witch like her mother before her? thought the elderly housekeeper in her own untranscribable language. What is there that could interest her in the dissonant shrieking of a parcel of demoralised nightingales?

No, the child was young and obstinate. And when one evening Margery found her shivering in her thin night-gown kneeling in a chair, and flattening her little nose into a white spot against the misty window-panes,—when she found the frail culprit in that heinous position (“waiting for the nightingales,” as the child vainly endeavoured to explain), she scolded her soundly and put her back into bed forthwith.

And when Helen made wicked, *wicked* faces over the counterpane, the good old woman was highly incensed at her ingratitude; so indignant did she grow that she informed the child how she would be “but a blind-blossom hersel’ (like summon avore hare) when aw was zaid an’ dune thet hed ter be!” with which vaticinal and disconnected ejacu-

lation she left the room. But the little poetess seemed in nowise disconcerted, for she showed her sense of the moral enlightenment she had undergone by softly getting out again when the footsteps died away.

CHAPTER II.

CONTINUATION OF CHAPTER I.

IN a very short while she had contracted a still worse propensity, which consisted in escaping out and wandering about the hills all by herself: she was once seen climbing on the summit of “Tantarabob’s Huxen.” This was really too serious to be put up with; she was in danger of her neck!

Margery, who first noticed the child’s perilous position, felt terrified, and clambered all the way up the hill to recover her. Her heart trembled with dread lest she should see the light form blown off the edge by the wind which whistled so keenly among the crevices of the rocks; but when she reached the top at last, and got within twenty paces of the spot, she found Helen sitting calmly on the edge of an impassable chasm, nursing her kitten with a perfectly composed countenance.

She stood still on the other side, frightened to move or speak, lest the child might be induced to escape into some more remote or dangerous place. Helen sat swinging her feet, and laughing maliciously at her from the other side, looking for all the world like some beautiful little mountain-

gnome paying a visit to the outside of its habitation. By dint of much coaxing she at last was persuaded to come back.

When they had once got safely into the house, Margery refused to give her the peculiar sweetmeat she had promised to make for the occasion; and she kept a strict and unrelenting watch over all the child's actions for the next five days. The consequence was that Helen grew so spiteful that she would not allow her nurse to come near her. When at length the old woman thought her sufficiently punished, she performed her promise; but Helen refused to accept the results of it; and she made such a threatening display of her toad (which she took out of his box for the occasion) that Margery was only too glad to escape uninjured.

But it was an impossibility to maintain a constant watch over the movements of a being like this, and Helen often managed to escape out by herself again. She seemed more and more to develope her passionate predilection for solitude; there was nothing she liked better than the liberty to run about in the wood, with the grey cat following at her heels, like the Icelandic goddess Freya and her feline emblem of beauty.

When the Rev. Oliver Serpleton arrived home through the rain, in the manner that has been alluded to in a previous chapter, he stood before the kitchen-fire to dry his coat. Happening to put his hand in his pocket, he found the branch of deadly nightshade there; he then removed the plant, wondering where he could have found it, and left it on the table.

After this he left the room, and forgot all about the occurrence.

Margery, waiting anxiously for the child's appearance through the storm, did not forget her habitual cleanliness; for she seized upon the wet branches and took them to one of the ground-floor windows, whence she flung them away through the rain.

Now it happened that the tendrils of the "dwale bluth," as she would have called it, fell within the shelter of an old cucumber-frame, the brick sides of which still remained, though the glass top was shattered to pieces. There in time they took root, and prospered as poisonous weeds will sometimes prosper in this world.

The old countrywoman quite lost all patience with Helen, as she heard the loud thunder-peals rolling overhead, and the rain sweeping down all around the house, making the frail window-panes vibrate in their sashes, and beating down heavily on the tiles of the roof; but her impatience speedily turned to fear as the storm continued, and still the truant did not return.

Was she standing under a tree? Then the lightning would infallibly fall upon that tree and kill her!

She grew more and more anxious as these ideas thronged upon her somewhat limited imagination; but at last the storm ceased, and the child came back all wet to the skin. Margery was so angry at not being able to produce any acknowledgment of the enormity of this conduct on Helen's part that she put her to bed after vainly endeavouring to make her stand in the corner.

What was it that caused Helen, the very next day, to run out into the wood again all by herself? What was she looking for?

Under every rock, root, and branch, the child searched

unceasingly. What vague longing impelled her angry little brain? What did she expect to find, and why were her eyes glittering so?

Whatever she sought to discover seemed, nevertheless, to elude her: no indication or sign of its presence. She got angry at last, and beat the immovable rocks with her small slender hands. Only as she came peering anxiously round the side of one of these rocks, she nearly stepped on the long lithe body of an adder, which twisted its sinister-looking head and hissed at her, with eyes almost as bright as her own, then glided swiftly away.

It might have been in answer to this, that she suddenly exclaimed "I won't!" with great emphasis. It seemed as though she supposed the snake to be bestowing some undesirable piece of advice upon her.

But she made no attempt to follow it, and from this one might judge her to have been in low spirits.

The more she prolonged her scrutiny the less likely it seemed to become successful. At last she became so tired-out and angry, both with herself and with everything about her, that she threw herself down and began to cry.

After this (perhaps, taking the snake's advice) she got up, dried her tear-besprinkled face, and went home.

All through the course of the next month Helen would barely notice her nurse; she quite gave up teasing her. For days together she sat near her uncle, either playing with her toad, or trying to lull herself to sleep, lying on her back, watching the sky with half-opened eyes, till she grew dizzy, and it seemed to her that she was about to drop off into the drifting clouds. How she longed to!

She was evidently brooding over something.

The old housekeeper began to grow more concerned than ever about her. Whence came this inexplicable alienation? What a wicked strange child, she and her toad! Ugh!

Sometimes she rubbed her eyes and thought she was dreaming. Where had this elf-child come from? Ah! that foreigner! She was more witch than woman, any day in the week. Her child took after her, maybe!

Alas poor Margery! It was all brought about by a series of petty injustices, all kindly intended doubtless, but administered without tact. She never struck the child, never! as she said to herself; but she did not at the same time admit that she had a "tongue with a tang,"—that is to say that she was in the habit of scolding all day long, from morning to nightfall.

Now the sensibility of a child may be wounded much more severely with a word than with a blow.

Matters came to such a pass at last that Helen even ceased making grimaces at her. She began to feel quite lonely. The solemn, weird countenance and large averted eyes haunted her at night. Margery scarcely thought them beautiful.

Alas poor woman! She did not understand the vagaries which the possession of genius and imagination is apt to lead some unfortunate beings into, from birth to death; and Helen was born to be an enigma and a torment to her.

So all throughout that month, and into the middle of September, Helen kept her own company; she was in depressed spirits, for she did not sing much, and left off talking to herself—a resource against *ennui* which had never before been known to fail her. Oliver Serpleton used to take her out on his walks, and even pat her head

at convenient opportunities. He was evidently growing fond of her, for once he conducted her to a little wash-hand basin which stood in his study, and there solemnly proceeded to wash her hands. "Because they are *not* clean," as he said to make the circumstance more apparent to her understanding. It was a singular method of ingratiating himself with a child; but still he meant it kindly.

One afternoon towards the fall of the year, when there was a west wind blowing, the warmth of which seemed to have diffused the many-coloured clouds, and swept them in long irregular streaks across the sky; at a moment when every point and angle turned towards the windy west was luminous and red with the light of the setting sun, Helen Serpleton wandered out into the garden under the elm-tree, whose leaves were just speckled with the yellow symptoms of the fast-approaching autumn's decay.

Margery had just been scolding her for pulling the parlour-chairs about; and she turned, gazing moodily at the door she had issued from, through which Margery's shrill voice was still heard. Then she clenched her little fists with a fierce action, and turned away again. Her eyes were glittering like fragments of broken glass when the sun shines.

She was in a dangerous mood. That was evident. Helen was a very spit-fire when her gipsy blood was up. She had a fiercely resentful little brain, and she was not less brief in thought than swift in action.

So she sat down on the edge of the cucumber-frame, drumming her small feet against the side in an impatient way, and still without unclenching her hands. She had been ironically told to go into the garden, and wait there

till she was in a better temper. But she seemed by no means trying to calm herself.

On the contrary, her wild-looking eyes grew brighter and brighter, till they seemed like two little sombre balls of fire. This was, probably, because the sinking sun lay full in front of her face down the ravine between the hills. It was a little obscured in the Dartmoor mist, and was not too bright to look upon.

Helen looked upon it. One of her wild and fantastical ideas flitted across her mind, and for one instant she smiled ; then she remembered her anger, and turned her face moodily away and lowered her eyes.

Of a sudden she started, and bent over the broken bars. *There* was what she had been looking after, for her down-cast eyes fell, with an instantaneous revival of interest, on the tendrils of the deadly nightshade, loaded with poison-flowers and berries, crawling stealthily round the inside of the frame, or crouching ignominiously along the damp ground. The traces of snail-tracks went all over the bricks and mould, and the leaves were bitten here and there ; but it was singular to note what a number of empty snail-shells were lying among its foliage. In spite of this, it had grown into a goodly plant.

The Dwale Bluth is a cowardly creeper, and knows no means of rising above the earth it springs from, unless by insinuating itself among the leaves of some bolder parasite. There it now lay beneath her gaze, even throwing a grim and sinister reflection on to her dark-complexioned face, and into her eyes ; there it lay at her feet, prone and helpless, as though it were entreating her to lift it.

CHAPTER III.

THE DWALE BLUTH.

SOME two hours afterwards Margery found the child moaning in a strange and pitiful manner. She had gone up to her bedroom, and was lying on her bed, with her small brown hands clenched in the counterpane: her eyeballs had grown dark and luminous, but seemed no longer to retain the acute and piercing look which usually distinguished them. Indeed, there was an expression of pain all over her face, and her red curved lips twitched constantly —perhaps from the same cause.

Still she lay there, obstinately refusing to speak or answer the questions that the old woman put to her. At last, as Margery tried to make her more comfortable by shifting the pillow under her head, she began complaining about the darkness in a faint voice, and wanted her nurse to bring a rushlight; now the sun had not yet sunk, its disk still remained above the hills, and a bright red reflection fell through the window full on to the child's head, fringing her dusky hair with gold and lighting her eyes up, so that the old servant could scarcely understand what she meant.

If she had looked carefully into Helen's face, she could not have failed to notice the unnatural and extraordinary dilation in the pupils of her eyes,—such an effect as is invariably produced by the action of belladonna, too powerful a dose of which makes the eyeball wonderfully beautiful, but blind at the same time. Poor Helen had found the poison-flower, which—though she had but a vague idea

of its qualities—she knew perfectly well would harm her, and, wild with resentment at the time, had seized the first opportunity of doing what she supposed would wreak her revenge on her fancied persecutor; though, as usual in such cases, its sweetness seemed considerably neutralized by the effect it had produced on herself.

Still, though Margery was as keen-sighted as an owl at midnight, she knew nothing of what had happened. Not being deeply versed in psychology, she looked more to the outside of things; and when her own eyes fell upon the branch of some plant which lay by the bedside, she instinctively picked it up and threw it into the fireplace without bestowing a thought on what she was about; she was far too used to the child's habits to be surprised at finding it there.

By the time Helen had again muttered something, in a lower whisper than before, to the effect that the room was turning and swimming round about her, Margery's mind was quite made up; the child had a sick-headache, and must be treated accordingly.

So she undressed her, perhaps somewhat more tenderly than usual, and put her inside the bed she lay upon; after that she descended to the kitchen to procure some home-made decoction of her own, which she considered in the light of an infallible remedy. Returning with this ten minutes later, she found the child sitting up in her night-gown with the bed-clothes tossed off her body, flinging her arms about her head and laughing violently, as though her delight at having deceived her nurse were too violent to be suppressed any longer;—“The little wicked wretch!” thought Margery.

But as—irate at the imposition put upon her—she stood and watched Helen's extravagant gestures, the fit of laughter passed suddenly away, and the child began crying and sobbing in an hysterical fashion strange to witness.

Then she flung herself down, twisting her body round and hiding her face in the pillow, with her little bistre-coloured arms curled round her head among the wild locks of hair. Margery seemed in no way able to make her aware of her presence. Suddenly she fixed her eyes on her nurse's face with a wildly-imploring look, and repeated some word over and over again,—a word which was apparently mere gibberish.

Margery bent down at last to find out what she wanted, and to her astonishment Helen attempted to clasp her round the neck. But in an instant she gave a startled angry cry, and Margery only removed her face in time to avoid a blow which was aimed at it.

“Oh, wicked ! wicked !” cried Helen writhing about and sobbing.

It was very perplexing and mysterious.

“Strat ma i’ th’ chucks !” exclaimed Margery to herself. “Sher maun be in an yepilipsy vit. She was born in this very room, and God prevent her from—”

Just at this juncture, as she was bending over Helen with an expression of something more than terror gathering in her eyes and face, the door opened and Mr. Serleton himself entered the room, with his daughter Leah clinging to his coat and crying. He evidently considered that something very serious must have taken place, for, on seeing his niece, all the blood left his cheeks, and, without paying attention to Margery's cry of alarm, he compressed

his lips tightly and leant over the bed, gazing in his short-sighted fashion at the child's altered face and appearance.

He certainly uttered two or three disconnected ejaculations, but his whole manner underwent a complete change and an extraordinary look of acuteness asserted itself in his features, in place of their usual absent-minded expression: it was one of those rare moments when the real individuality of a man is enabled to assert itself,—like a gleam of sunshine breaking through the clouds.

For two or three seconds neither of them spoke; and Helen remained twisting her arms and wrists about in the blankets, without being seemingly aware of their presence. What an extraordinary contrast was presented by their three faces! Oliver's, acute and piercing, with his eyes hidden in the gleam of his spectacles; Margery's, half stupefied with alarm.

The weird solemn beauty of little Helen's features seemed more wonderful than ever; but there was a strange wild look about them almost like insanity. At times she cowered on the bed like a frightened animal that had crouched down dreading a blow, lying there with compressed lips and straining eyes; then she would seem to recover and begin tossing her arms about, laughing and singing alternately.

All this while the sun sinking rapidly over the brow of the hill caused the tumultuous shadows of the elm branches to flicker about the bed and over their figures, till they seemed more like the beckoning arms of some spectre than the boughs of a tree.

The wind kept rising, and every now and then a handful of dead leaves were dislodged from these branches and

flung pattering against the glass ; sometimes a bough swung round grating against the sashes. It is impossible to say how sounds of this sort impress themselves on the hearing when the mind is oppressed with any sense of anxiety ; it seemed as though the wind outside were trying to emulate or mock the moans that were uttered inside,—though indeed the child's voice was infinitely more pitiable and far more replete with meaning than the wind's.

Oliver scarcely spoke a word ; Margery was sent to fetch some more pillows, and with these the child was quite propped up. Then he tied her feet together with a soft handkerchief, and fastened her arms down to her sides in the same fashion, so that she could only move her body and head. There seemed some magnetic influence in his hands which caused Helen to become utterly passive whenever they touched her ; it was quite different with Margery, who however placed so little reliance in her master's skill, and showed so little compunction in owning to it, that he had at last positively to invent some excuse for sending her out of the room. After questioning her for some time in his shrill sharp voice, he found that she understood nothing of how Helen had become so ill, save that it had all, according to her, come on within the last quarter of an hour. He told her to fetch or send for some doctor ; "But first take Leah away," said he.

So little Leah, frightened out of her wits by her cousin's naughty behaviour, was, in spite of her struggles, taken down into the kitchen, where, after a while, she cried herself to sleep on a settle ; to prevent her leaving the room, Margery locked the door. After one more hurried glance at Helen, she set out—innocently—through the

darkness of the night, leaving her master to tend the sick child, though not without many secret misgivings in her heart. A pretty nurse was he to keep watch and ward in a sick room! She happened to forget her umbrella, so that when she arrived at Cranberry she was wet through. But, worse than all, the lights were extinguished, and she found herself standing alone at the corner of a dreary village street, with nothing in sight but a perspective of black angular silhouettes, formed by an irregular line of thatched roofs and brick chimneys, which loomed against the gloomy sky on both hands, their edges blurred here and there by the slanting lines of the rain, but unrelieved by a light in any quarter.

No one can wonder that, under such a trying concatenation of circumstances, Margery should lose her temper; more especially when it is known that she found the only doctor in the place to be away at Limmerstone, and that if "wanted" he would have to be sent for.

In the meanwhile, having succeeded in getting rid of her, Mr. Serleton left the room and returned with a glass funnel, such as he used among his chemicals, and with half-a-dozen small phials. These he placed on the table beside him, while he deliberately mixed their contents in a medical tumbler, which seemed marked as with the signs of the zodiac; but he presently desisted, and began to examine Helen's face very carefully, looking at her eyes with a magnifying-glass even.

She had grown perfectly quiet, save for the twitching in her eyelids and fingers; but he could see by her face that her mind was more disordered and morbidly alert than if she had been in the worst stage of a brain fever. She had

evidently taken some poison which had power to render her delirious; he could not think what it could be. Once she cried, "It's crawling round me! Oh look at its eyes!"—these being the only intelligible and articulate sounds he heard her utter.

The child was, without doubt, growing worse minute by minute. Some vague dream or vision was being evolved by delirium under her poor hot little forehead, over which the subtle and delicate tracery of blue veins was swollen so tightly,—some fantasy that ought never to have been imaginable in the brain of a child so young as Helen. He drew all the hair back from her brow, in order to examine her face more carefully, and tried to cool her temples by spreading some water on them with the palms of his hands.

It is a total delusion to suppose that imagination gives pleasure to its possessor, for it is only too often quite the reverse; and, in cases of bodily sickness, when the imaginative faculties of the brain grow weak with delirium, their uncontrolled wanderings are perfectly maddening.

There have been people who have gone through life without once developing the faculty of dreaming, and there are some who dream solely by night.

Then, again, there exists a race who dream away not only the night but the daytime as well; but these are very idle people, and indeed some assert them to be insane. They use their day-dreams to amuse others with, and, in some cases, gain their living with them; but very often, owing to the excessive and morbid cultivation of their imaginative faculties, they are visited by dreams which are far from amusing either to themselves or others.

The vital force, or power of receiving impressions, con-

tained in the brain, never sleeps, and death alone can render it insensible. Even death itself is full of dreams to some of us,—full of the souls of our dead friends,—angelic sirens who lure and sing to us from its bleak and visionary shores.

A vague, dim landscape surrounded the child, no single object of which had power to impress itself on her memory ; for a dream is a perfect work of art and never distracts the sleeper's attention from the chief point of interest in its composition. The impressions received in a dream are infinitely vaguer, and at the same time more accurately delineated, than those received by the mind when perfectly awake. A dream is more pitiless and unrelenting than life itself. Woe to the wretch who seeks refuge in sleep from the tormenting pangs of an evil conscience ! A dream is a thing utterly by itself. It is illogical ; for it *appears* to produce effects which are seemingly causeless, though, in reality, a pool of water does not reflect the sky more faithfully than a dream reflects some forgotten action in the dreamer's life.

It might have been a dreary expanse of mist that Helen, as she lay on the bed insensible and muttering deliriously, dreamt she was wandering through. Had she been the first human being ever created, her mind could not have seemed freer of any recollection of her former ways of life. Yet she was sick at heart, and some undefined sense of fear dogged her footsteps, causing her to advance continually. Every now and then her hair kept getting into her eyes, making them wince and smart with the pain ; she rubbed and rubbed at them with her wrists till they were hot with friction. At last her hands and arms got para-

lysed,—she could not move them, so the hair got into her eyes whether she liked it or not.

But this was a minor inconvenience; for a beautiful sad-eyed face kept floating before her in a grey dreamy aureole of mist,—a face which she dimly remembered as her mother's. At last she could not refrain from tears, and her very limbs shuddered with the intensity of her longing and anxiety to clasp it.

But when, after infinite time and toiling, she succeeded,—ugh! the skin was all wrinkled. It was Margery's face laughing in hers,—laughing at the deception she had practised on her.

Then, as she stood gazing with mingled disgust and wonder, the scanty grey locks turned black again, the cold grey glittering eyes darkened and recovered their lost fire, the sour and withered lips curled and turned red, while the wrinkles effaced themselves round the eyelids and cheeks, and once more her mother's face lured her onwards—only to a fresh deception crueler and more tantalizing than the last.

Suddenly this face became a mere spot before her eyes, just such a spot as would be created in them by gazing too long at the sun. It moved about and increased in size.

An instantaneous terror seized her. She strove instinctively to cry out, but to no purpose, and a sickening dread filled all her child's soul.

The strength seemed to leave her limbs; and her eyes, drawn irresistibly towards the object of her terror, gazed with horrified anticipation at its development.

Presently all recollection of her individuality seemed lost for a moment, while her body and soul were merged

into one vague deadly sensation of fear, as a pair of enormous eyes became visible, glittering full upon hers with irresistible fascination,—eyes which were coal-black and gleaming with cruel icily-cold lights, but each rimmed with a streak of red gold.

Where had she already seen those eyes,—that flat head from which they protruded so strangely? The powerful jaw, and the full nostrils which palpitated in unison with the incessant movement of the throat,—surely she knew them!

The grotesque and clumsy body, the hind legs doubled up, with their long webbed claws, the awkward action of the fore-legs as they bent under the weight of the head and chest, with toes turned in towards the white-skinned clammy stomach:—was it the toad whose life she had saved? Why, he had grown as large and as hideous as an Egyptian statue; she was no bigger than a fly before him.

Would he molest her, or would he remember and recognize her? Surely she had once been very kind to him! She looked at his eyes beseechingly as these speculations thronged round her timorous heart. She could have crouched down imploringly and fawned at his feet, only she was powerless to move.

Gradually she began to regain her lost recollection, and as she strove to think a faint ray of hope came to her aid.

She remembered to have noticed, when he was in her possession, that she had never on any occasion seen him touch a dead insect, or one which did not move. Now she herself was incapable of movement, and she resolved to feign death.

Still the animal sat before her, supported on its fore-legs

and immovable as a sphinx, save for the hideous palpitation under its jawbone. Surely she must ultimately escape it!

Presently she felt something cold on her face ; it was the foremost breath of a gust of wind which, hitherto imperceptible, had now sprung up. Then, as it grew stronger, she became aware of a movement in the curls of her hair ; they blew right out in front of her face, and fell down on to her shoulder again.

In an instant the toad's flat head turned cunningly on one side, and his cruel goblin-like eyes glittered with avidity,—the movement of his jaw causing his throat to shrivel up into a thousand wrinkles, and drawing the skin tight over his back.

But now the wind died away for a while, and the disturbed hair remained peacefully on her shoulders.

The toad watched her narrowly ; perhaps he was short-sighted, she thought.

He was a suspicious beast, for no amount of reasoning seemed able to convince him he had not seen something move ; but he was troubled with a short memory, for he forgot what it was that had attracted him, and turned about, looking for it on all sides. He was evidently determined to remain on the alert.

She knew that if detected she could expect no mercy. Oh that her hair could only be bound up in the once detested fashion ! Was it going to betray her, after all her love for it ?

She felt the wind upon her face once more—growing stronger and stronger, till it blew the curls off her neck. She made a wild effort to escape from the fascination which paralysed her, and seemed to scream aloud in her terror.

CHAPTER IV.

* * * *

“**THERE** can be no time to lose!” exclaimed Mr. Serpleton out loud as he started up from the bedside. “She has undoubtedly taken some vegetable poison . . . eaten it. Just as I thought! Poor child, I fear I have neglected her.”

He spread some more of the water on the child’s brow, as he said this, and blew upon it with his lips to keep it cool. He seemed very fond of her; and showed it too in his odd way. He even went so far as to kiss her; or it might have been that he bent down too low, and touched her with his lips by mistake.

Under Helen’s hot forehead, with its throbbing blue veins, what a terrible drama was being enacted! Oliver Serpleton was a man of immense erudition and science; yet with all his intellectual insight he only saw a child lying on the bed, tossing her head deliriously from side to side and trying to free her hands. If he could only have seen what was passing underneath his lips at the moment when they touched her brow!

But he merely heard the scream she gave, and found that she had succeeded in freeing her hands. So he took them away from the front of her face, where she obstinately held them, and tied them softly down to her side again. Then he turned swiftly to the table where he had left his medicines.

He had a shrewd suspicion of what the truth was—a suspicion which had taken up some little time and attention

to arrive at ; but now he was swift in action. All traces of irresolution left his manner. In the different things he had done to relieve the child hitherto, he had used a tenderness which her own mother, had she been living, could not have found fault with ; but now he became quick, impassive, and methodical as an automaton.

In a few moments he was satisfied with the mixture he had made, and came back to the child's side, putting the lamp so as to throw the light over her face.

First he wiped his spectacles. Then he opened her lips with his finger ; but here a slight difficulty arose. How to pour the medicine down her throat he could not tell, for her teeth were too tightly clenched to open without hurting her.

On consideration, however, this question was soon solved. Helen had just arrived at that period of life when, by an immutable law of Nature, the first crop of teeth are apt to drop out ; leaving their places vacant and waiting to be refilled. One of her teeth had disappeared in this way some three weeks before, and (though the other had become visible) there still remained an aperture large enough to admit the end of the funnel. Through it he poured the contents of the glass. The child swallowed it without resistance. In doing this he made a discovery—and one which by no means reassured him. Caught between two of her teeth, he found a fragment of some green leaf which he eagerly released and examined through the magnifying glass.

He seemed struggling to think for a moment ; then took up the lamp and began to look round the room ; examining every inch of it methodically till he came to the fireplace.

There he found a branch of the plant "Atropa Belladonna," with some of its leaves bitten, some torn off, and all the berries gone from their stalks.

* * * * *

In about an hour and a half Margery came back, and without the doctor. Even during that short while a great change had been effected in Helen's condition. She had been very sick—an incident which, not being so desirable aesthetically as medically, had better be left undescribed.

To her unspeakable amazement, Margery discovered her master carrying the child about the room in his arms.

Presently he put her into the bed again, and sat watching her keenly. She was asleep breathing peacefully. Then he sat down beside her, as though he were still in doubt; he seemed to think that at any time the symptoms of the poison might again reassert themselves in her system. But the medicines he had used were too powerful; she slept calmly.

During this time he refused to allow Margery to have anything to do with her; in a while he made her leave the room and go to her own bed. Throughout the night he sat alone by the bedside, reading a book and occasionally making notes or looking for a word in his dictionary.

If ever Helen's respiration stopped for an instant, he looked up anxiously and waited till it began again. These were the only movements he seemed to make.

While he sat there the wind and rain over the hills increased to a perfect hurricane; it howled round the house — growing wilder and wilder as it felt the stout resistance made by the old walls,— and groaned in the chimneys till they seemed transformed into the pipes of

some vast and monstrous organ ; while the wet branches of the tree outside flapped on the window-panes like worn-out travellers knocking vainly for admission at the door of a surly inn. The trunk itself swung backwards and forwards, creaking in every bough. The nightingales had all gone long ago—a very different song to theirs was being sung in its branches now.

Among all the vague indefinite noises of this autumnal storm Helen lay sleeping in her bed—sleeping soundly and dreamlessly. She might have seemed dead, save for her respiration. Her hands were rigid and her eyelids tightly closed ; her feet seemed colder even than lumps of ice.

Towards day-break, however, she grew restless ; and at last opened her eyes with a confused half-awakened gesture of her head. For some time she lay back, looking dreamily at a reflection on the ceiling : then she asked faintly for some water. Something which was placed by her uncle in the glass given her sent her off to sleep again, and it was late in the morning before she again came to consciousness.

She was so weak as to be hardly able to move, and lay vainly trying to remember and piece together the vague impression left to her of what she had passed through. Her brain was so weak that everything she tried to look at in the room seemed to swim before her eyes. At last she turned her head feebly on one side, and perceiving Margery near her she demanded,

“ Ah ! What has been the matter with me, Margery ? I can’t remember ! ”

BOOK IV.—THE CASTLE-ROCK.

CHAPTER I.

ARTHUR.

“ Do you not recollect how I first met you; sitting on the Cranberry-farm gate, basking in the warmth, and gazing straight up at the terrible sun? What a silly oaf of a child I must have been! I know I watched the reflection dancing in your eyeballs—making your eyes look so bright and grand—till it excited such emulation in my own invidious little self that, without at all considering why, I must needs go all but blinding my own eyes by trying to imitate you. The sun wouldn’t come out of my sight for days. Oh Arthur, Arthur! what fools we are down here! ‘ The wisest of mankind is but an ape before the gods,’ as uncle Serpleton used to say, when he was talkative.”

“ Ah! in those days, Helen, I used to wonder what strange sensation it could be that passed all through me whenever I turned my face up to where the warmth came from. I used to lie upon my back for hours, trying to realize its meaning. Sometimes it used to come and go rapidly; but, each time it disappeared, a cold chill seemed to fall simultaneously over my limbs. I can understand now that the

clouds were scudding past the sun—though I knew nothing of that then."

"There must have been a very heavy downfall of rain last night. The mist is out all over the hills and valleys. I saw it this morning, from the windows of my house; and watched it slowly sweeping along their channels, till it all joined together where the valleys of the Lynn unite, and still it swept downwards. It must be all over the sea by now—I never saw such a sight. We shall soon be on the path now, and then I'll tell you all that's to be seen, Haenton. I shall take you up the Castle-Rock, for we can sit there without fear of interruption. Step carefully! We have only to get round the corner of the rocks. Now we can look right out to sea—only it's all hidden! Why! the mist seems covering the water like a death-shroud. How dismal the waves sound, palpitating and beating beneath it—I shouldn't like to be scrambling over those great stones now, as we were the other day, Arthur."

"Is the sun sinking, Helen?"

"It's just dipping into the clouds of mist, and fringing all their distant edges with fire. The sky above is utterly calm and cloudless. It seems dissolving tenderly into all the efflorescent hues I have sometimes noticed in a winter sunset, when the undefiled snow lies over the plains.

Th' Angles wert just beginning ter molt,
Sae the yearth wert laden wi' snaw,

—as we children used to sing. The zenith is stained a deep purple; beneath that, in the middle sky, fresh flushes of clear luminous green and yellow are quivering and flickering perpetually, as though by some subtle electricity. Just

over where the sun has half disappeared the horizon is coruscated with a passionate and intensely radiating aureole of fire, too bright for my eyes to rest upon."

"Turn my face towards it, Helen, love."

"There!"

"Nothing to be seen—nothing."

"But I've told you all about it! Ah how glad I am that I can speak so freely with you! Haenton, Haenton! how I long for the day when I shall call myself Mrs. Haenton instead of—I mean when I shall be your wife! How shall I attend to you and pet you sufficiently? I can never devise schemes enough! What *shall* I do with you?"

"Be always by my side, love, and let me touch your face occasionally. Speak now and then—and, above all, sing to me. I never heard a voice like yours!"

"How you always talk about people's voices!"

"Most people *are* only voices to me."

"And you like my voice *best of all*? Mind what you say, Arthur, I'm apt to be jealous at times."

"Best of all!"

"And am *I* nothing but a voice to you?"

"What a question to ask me, Helen! What a wild girl you are! you and your tongue frighten everyone you come across."

"Wild birds sing the sweetest, eh? At any rate, I shall only allow people with very gruff throats to come near us, in order to show mine off: if you annoy me, I shall speak hoarsely myself."

Both of them began laughing, then after a while they became silent.

But Helen's almost deliriously restless lips seemed in-

capable of remaining long without movement. She began singing a snatch of some song in a low voice.

“ What sweet lips are reddening
In the void beyond to-morrow ?
Ah ! what cause for joy or sorrow
May the coming seasons bring ?
Nay ! they’re all too sweet, those days, for our imagining.”

The beauty of tone in her utterance, and the facility with which she selected her words when speaking, were wonderful ; at times she spoke with an almost bewildering rapidity. Her speech altered in modulation like the subtle, mysterious music of some old Italian master. One could not dissociate the sound of her voice from herself—its purity and sweetness seemed to linger perpetually round the slenderness of her form and face. There was something so fascinating in its sound that one could have lost its meaning in listening to it. Her laughter was simply exquisite.

Presently she ceased singing, and kissed her companion’s hand. “ There ! ” she exclaimed, “ that’s a stanza of one of your own songs. Do you like me to sing them ? ”

“ Why, that’s all I make them for ! But tell me, Helen, —where are we ? ”

“ On the path that overhangs the sea.”

“ Is the sun quite sunk yet ? ”

“ Down over the sea there’s nothing but a volume of white desolate vapour, nothing in sight but you and I, the great black rocks above us, and the red sinking sun below. It’s still glowing on our faces, but there is only the upper rim of its disk visible. I can’t bear to look any longer—it dazzles me so.”

They were now passing along the sheer craggy face of the precipice, at a point where the corroding rock, across which the dangerous path led, was literally suspended over the sea. Haenton was on the inside of the way, while Helen had hold of his arm, as if she were leading him. Her head leaned fondly on his shoulder with a caressing movement, and they loitered and stopped every few steps.

While he listened intently to her constantly-recurring descriptions of the scenery round them, he made no effort to see the things she spoke of for himself; but once he did turn his face, straining his eyes full on the mist below, and turning them afterwards in an earnest yet vacant way towards the countenance and lips of the speaker. This woman, singularly graceful as she was (for she looked indeed as if the very wind could have shaken her as it would an aspen leaf), had nevertheless a face that no casual glance could have lighted on without some sudden and instinctive sense of fear.

It was in no degree the want of beauty which made her features thus conspicuous. Her eyes were large, dark, and luminous; looking from under their subtly-curved brows with a wild, half-meaningless vacillatory flash and glitter, they seemed as though they might grow wonderfully fascinating or repulsive at will, and without perceptible change. The complexion of her face was all sunburnt, the lips very dark and red and curled, the chin small, keenly formed, and joining the transparent delicate ear in one complete curve. The loose unbound tresses of her hair which hung down over her neck and shoulders were, strange indeed. They were very dark in colour, so that they might have seemed almost black at times; strong, coarse, and crisp,

of that kind that always appears surcharged with electricity ; but in the glimmering dusk of the twilight, whenever the last dying gleams from the still resplendent sunset caught upon their tangles, they glowed in so singular a fashion that it seemed as if a live flame were entangled and bound up with them and were constantly shifting and showing through.

She wore no hat ; but a kind of fantastic crown, woven of deadly nightshade, was bound round her head with delicate fillets of hair. Some of its winding tendrils were caught up and clinging in the curled wanton clusters which hung loose on her neck. The dark-green leaves and unripe berries of this sinister-reputed plant suited wonderfully with the complexion ; they seemed in some mysterious way as though capable of throwing some vague explanation on her character, but the ideas they intimated were in no degree definable. It was not that there was even the suggestion of a bad heart, but she looked as though she might be wicked if she chose. A keen atmosphere of nervous excitability seemed perpetually to tremble around her ; sometimes quivering in the vivacious lines of her mouth, sometimes expressed in the swan-like action of her frail throat, or even shown in the subtle twisting of her hand and wrist, and in the way she would set her small light feet upon the ground.

The young man whose arm she had in her own might have been of the same age as herself—about twenty-three, —but he looked older. His features bore unmistakable signs of mental pain and sedulous anxiety, though at present the traces were half obliterated by an expression so replete with ecstacy that it was strange to contemplate.

He was taller than she, and slender almost to emaciation. His eyes were bright, large, diaphanous, and glittering with a kind of mystical inner light, which seemed to be emitted, as it were, from his very brain. They were constantly fixed in a vacant irresolute gaze straight in front of him, as though he saw nothing with them ; but they had, nevertheless, something awe-striking about their expression,—they were, unmistakably, the eyes of a poet. There was a firm look about the line of his mouth and chin which seemed to betoken energy. His filmy black hair rose in lustrous waves all round his head, and fell across his temples in long unconfined curls, for he also was without covering.

Suddenly Helen happened to take a fragment of the leaf out of her own hair, as if to place it in his with her disengaged hand. He took it into his own, examining its shape with his white fingers, but without looking on it.

“ Why will you always wear this plant in your hair ? Arn’t the other flowers as beautiful ? ” he asked ; “ I never find you without it. Why won’t you give me an unevasive answer ? I’ve asked twenty times if I have once. It’s the root that grows all over the rocks by the third turn of the Lynn side. My sister told me it was poisonous. Why *do* you wear it ? ”

“ It’s forbidden fruit, I suppose : but I can’t really say myself, Haenton ; perhaps it’s because it suits my complexion. Listen, I’ll tell you if I can, Arthur. You remember how ill I was once ? ”

“ Well, you’ve spoken of it.”

“ That was when I was quite a young child, out among the moors at Serpleton House. I used to insist on wan-

dering about in that old straggling wood all by myself, and loitering in the tumble-down garden where I carved your name and mine on the elm-trunk. It's all worn out by the wind and rain now. Heigho! as the old song says, I was young, and more thoughtless than I am even now; and when, one afternoon late in the autumn, I chanced to disentangle a luxurious branch of these berries all ripened and running to seed,—just because I had been especially warned not to touch them,—I ate some,—oh! a whole cluster. They had a half-sweet half-bitter taste, and I was a long while trying whether I liked them or not; then I decided no, and threw them away. Ah! but I can't remember anything else until I was recovering from a fit of delirium that seemed to consume my poor little childish brain away. It seems that I was quite blind for a time, but I recollect a vast sea of grey glittering light that I always seemed spinning aound and suffocating in, and yet I could not die. At last I came round a little, and my sight came back too; it was terrible to experience the first struggle of returning consciousness. Oh how bewildering to find after all that one was *not* a mere particle of unreasoning agonized sensation, tossing about through space like a sparrow in a whirlwind, striving wildly to piece together one's disconnected ideas! There was an old ballad that nurse used to sing us to sleep with; it kept crooning over and over again in my ears till it nearly drove me mad. I recollect one verse, with its ever-recurring burden :

Woe to the unborn sons of the Tracies !

(Say what redemption is left through all time)

O could they reach to the land where God's grace is,

Baffled and faint with the storm-wind's embraces,
(The wind that wails for their forefather's crime)
With ever the wind and rain in their faces,—
Never again till the end of time.

Only its meaning seemed transformed into something vague and awful beyond all explanation... How I always diverge from what I'm speaking of! Well, the sensation all went off gradually as soon as I grew well enough to analyse it. Ah! what a strange child I was; what things I used to say and do! Well, it went off, and my blindness with it, but like the dregs of sea-foam remaining after a storm, it left a kind of sad feeling behind that never has since quitted me, save at intervals like this. Oh how my brain wanders! Well, I'll tell you: for more than a year after that I never could get rid of a sickening idea that my luxuriant hair, which you make poetry on, had all been turned into wreaths of deadly nightshade that were rooted in my brain; and that, whenever I went to sleep or forgot to be upon my guard in any way, its loose tendrils would maliciously try to creep round, and even insinuate themselves into my mouth to poison me again. I even expected it to crawl through my ears. Oh how I used to shudder sometimes if a fragment of loosened hair fell over my face! it seemed always stealthily crawling round my neck. Ah! it was a crafty foe for a child to deal with! I know it was only an idea,—a monomania, but I could not help it. For more than five months I never dared to sleep with my lips open, and used to bind my stocking round my mouth at night when nurse left us; only then, for I never dared to tell them, I was far too frightened. Oh don't look so horrified, Haenton!"

She interrupted herself with a light ringing laugh, and bent over to kiss the hand she held in her own, and went on.

“Once Leah threw all my hair over my face in play, and I grew wild with passion against her. Then I pretended to forgive her, and asked leave to sleep in her bed that night as a token of forgiveness, really in the hope that the night-shade would mistake her mouth for my own. But I got more and more frightened and repentant as I lay awake in the darkness, till at last I could stand it no longer, and sprang out and left her sleeping. This was in mid-winter, and I used to try and convince myself that flowers couldn’t grow then; but it was all no use. At last I got a pair of scissors and cut it all off. I don’t know why I never thought of doing this before, for I was cunning enough too in those days. They only thought it was my “*appurted witherful deviltry,” as they called it, and nurse added that I was “†antle-beer:” for none knew what was the real cause of the disaster, and I never told them. Before it grew again the sensation left me; it created an entire revulsion of feeling to find that I was free; and somehow, strange to say, made me take to wearing the real nightshade in my hair whenever I could procure it. I never knew the causes of half the whims I can’t help persisting in. Perhaps it is mere perversity; but I have no influence over my own destiny. Ah me! I wonder where it will end! They tried to prevent my getting the stuff, and *that* settled it. Nightshade; belladonna’s another name for it,—beautiful lady. Don’t you think I have a right to do as I like with it now, and wear it in my hair? Doesn’t it appertain to me? ”

* Sullen wilful devilry. † Cross-grained.

“Nightshade might suit *me* well enough, Helen.” As he said this he looked right in her face with the same strained, eager gaze,—a yearning, inexpressibly tender look, in which all his features seemed to participate equally. She became silent again, and kissed his hand a second time.

CHAPTER II.

THE INFORMANTS.

THEY were both still slowly loitering in the glimmer of the twilight along the intricate path which overlooked the abyss of sea-fog. The unnatural and sombre scenery, with the weird spirit of which they both seemed so well identified, was still plainly visible by the faded luminousness of the sky. Suddenly the blind man looked up, saying he could hear the sound of voices, and he turned his sightless eyeballs in the direction the sound came from. He was right, for in a few moments they heard distinctly a shrill chorus of childish throats singing a song which at that time all Devonshire children knew by heart.

A dwalin* drumble-drone† i’ th’ rewts,
 An apple-dreane‡ aboo :
 Th’ yapple-dreane sturtled§ an stugged i’ th’ freuts,
 Th’ drone i’ th’ yavil|| flew.

 An’ apple-dreane an’ a drumble-drone
 Wert aw’ ther’ wert ter zee.
 Th’ drumble-drone lay dead i’ th’ snaw,
 Th’ yapple-dreane i’ th’ dree !

* Delirious. † Bee. ‡ Wasp. § Buzzed. || Common.

This simple ballad is supposed to narrate the lives of a bee and wasp, one of whom lived in the roots, the other in the branches, of a tree,—who being both overtaken by a snow-storm, met with untimely ends.

Presently the voices died away, and a party of wild-looking sun-burnt children abruptly straggled round the winding foot-way. When they caught sight of these two figures advancing towards them they all recoiled with a general cry, and scrambled behind a frowning lichen-covered boulder of rock. One of them cried, “She’s Leddy Helen Thurlstone, th’ Waters-Meet wetch, we’ th’ dwal flewrs* till her hair! I baint a gwain to pass th’ drangway† by her up hare.”

This discreet, if not exactly courageous, determination being proclaimed quite loudly, the lady heard it and burst out laughing. “You’ll know now what you’ve got for a sweetheart, Arthur, eh ?”

As they came to the place where they had seen and heard them, they found the children gone ; they were nowhere visible in the path in front. But looking up she saw a brown, red-cheeked face with its bright eyes gazing out through locks of sun-bleached, uncombed hair: the owner was watching them across the edge of a jagged cleft in the rock above. She twisted her graceful head as if making faces at him, and for more than ten seconds as she passed she kept her glittering eyes firmly on his, and passed her free hand mysteriously up and down towards him with a weird movement. During this time he remained as if transfixed ; when she took her strange eyes off he disappeared

* Deadly nightshade.

† Path.

instantly. But if she had gazed for half-an-hour he would probably have had to stop, for she seemed to be possessed of the then little-known power of mesmerism.

“Who are these children? What are they avoiding us for?” said the young man, whose acute ear seemed to have divined what had happened.

“Two or three of the wild childer from the village. Little wretched urchins! They’ve been at some mischief, and they’re frightened to meet us.”

“I’m passionately fond of children, I like to hear them playing round me. It’s strange you shouldn’t like them; but they know it, evidently.

“No, I do *not*, Haenton! I saw a little too much of my young friends out by Watern Tor when I was a child myself.”

They both of them now began to quicken their steps. When they had completely passed by, these children—five in number, and all boys,—emerged back into the path. The youngest was about seven, the eldest ten: the white-haired one Helen had looked at was pale and scared. Sure now of the passage behind being free for them to escape along, if circumstances should render flight a necessity, and led by that insatiable spirit of curiosity which the souls of all children are supposed to be impelled by, they began cautiously to follow the lovers. Creeping carefully behind such stones and rocks as could afford them a convenient shelter, they soon came upon the objects of their timorous curiosity, some fifty yards in advance, through the indistinct haze of half-light which now deepened everywhere. The lady’s dress of faint yellow serge showed dark in the twilight.

The roughly-hewn path is about a mile and a half long,

up to the place where the wildly distorted but picturesque crags of mingled slate, granite, and gravel, composing the summits of the second cliff above, abruptly terminate. Then it leads round the face of the precipice in a most unexpected manner, and on to a level expanse of dry green-sward, fringed deeply with ferns. Out of this rises the strangely-formed development of dislocated rock-strata and broken stones, all wildly over-run with straggling thorns, sterile ferns, and grey stone lichen, which is called the "Castle-Rock." This seemed from its shape as if Nature really had undertaken—in an abortive form—to construct in it the outlines of a mediæval fortress: far underneath at its base the damp dripping caverns which the resistless sea had undermined in the core of the stone might represent its dungeons. Standing out against the sky from the very edge of the cliff—even overhanging it in some places (for it all leans to one side)—it now looked a weird marvel-exciting place indeed. It was so like one of the tors of Dartmoor that one might half have expected to find the druidical logan stone on its summit carved with receptacles for rain-water, into the reflected skies of which shuddering devotees were once wont to gaze for the secrets of futurity. Beneath, the white mist clung in wreaths midway up, concealing the bleak iron-grey confusion of rocks tumbled one over another round the granite of its base which sinks into the embrace of the cold sea some two hundred fathoms below.

Up the stony path which wound round its steep sinister-looking sides, half lost in shadow, but at last appearing on its very summit, these keen-eyed children watched the two figures ascending—nor were they daunted by the breathless

solitude of the deepening night. Their childish souls were undismayed at the awe-striking walls of black rock, and the vague noiseless waves of mist which surged up against their outlines; the mystery and shadow of the coming darkness had no alarm for them. Yet, for all this apparent fearlessness, they were terribly frightened at these two figures, notwithstanding the uncontrollable attraction which caused them to follow their movements.

While watching them slowly ascending in the shadows of the rock, they remained silent. There was something completely mysterious about the blind man and the "witch" going at this time of the night up into this place, haunted to them as it was with such innumerable goblin-legends; and, when they saw two little moving specks appear on the summit defined against the pale sky, their brave but palpitating little hearts failed them, and, urged by an irresistible impulse, they took to their heels.

Some quarter of a mile up the rough path, where they had quite lost sight of the rock round the numerous turnings, they stopped to breathe; for the youngest of their number, unable to run so fast, was left behind and cried bitterly. When this little one rejoined them they hurried along to regain the village by the side of the Lynn in a less undignified manner.

"My muther says she's a vit o' th' dwalls* on she," exclaimed one shrilly.

"Eh, daddy says t'ers an angle-twitch till her rewdon†."

"Sher nare wears nane!" screamed another, whose nature seemed to be of a lamentably sceptical tendency.

* She is not right in her head. † A blind-worm in her bonnet.

"I yeard granny tell as sher was a witch ; sher said as sher dussent goa by hare i' th' gloam vor adrad o' baing *overlooked*.* Sher's th' crime† o' th' country!"

"Her eyes glints like yembers i' th' dark," cried a fourth in corroboration.

"Muther says as her gude-mon's awa' naw, an' buddled‡; but sher says as he'd put an overrath § ind to't, nif he chud come nigh on her; cause its wrongfu' var her ter gad aut arter dimmet o' neerts, without 'un'!" (This last sentiment must however be looked upon as somewhat illogical, one may observe in parenthesis).

"I chud reckon hers ginged yeng Haenton, cause 'un's dark i' th' eyes, by gieen' on un' thae pizon-maurs || her prinks in sher's hair" said the youngest of the party with profound solemnity, and with a stoical disregard to the proprieties of the personal pronouns, which may be considered as truly philosophical.

"Hot's thatte dawn hinder ¶? Its zume mon a comin' along ter drangway up hare!" interrupted another pointing suddenly along the path. "He won't be from th' stoke; ** I daunt knaw th' daps †† on un."

Their shrill, childish voices, piercing the silence with strange yet musical pronunciation, ceased again. Sure enough the great black figure of a man was seen coming rapidly along the winding path through the darkness: soon he arrived where these children stood.

* Devonshire version of the *Jettatura*. † Talk. ‡ Drowned.

§ Quick end. || Roots. ¶ Yonder. ** Village. †† Likeness.

CHAPTER III.

THURLSTONE.

HE was evidently very tall and strongly built, his face seemed bearded all over the under part, and his eyes gleamed under his brows; but it was so dark now that the rest of his figure was hardly discernible. He did not appear to have noticed the children, for he came on with rapid strides, and muttered something like a sudden curse as one of them came in his way and he found them all collected on the path before him. He passed by, however, and before he had gone five steps turned round and asked if any of them had seen a lady down the path, or anywhere in the valley beyond.

“ Ess mearster, Missus Thurlstone th’ leddy fr’ Waters-Meet House and young blind Haenton,” answered one readily. “ They maun be a-zitting up atop o’ th’ gurt vramp shaken* skart† i’ th’ yavil yonder. We zeed em goa.”

“ What the devil!” and the man gave a violent stamp with his foot. “ Come with me and show me where you mean.”

“ Naw, zir, I daunt likes ter!” exclaimed the boy cautiously, receding from him.

“ It’s Gartrill Thurlstone o’ Waters-Meet hisen zelv: it’s hisen spirit, I knaws un!” cried one suddenly, unable to repress his speech even in his presence.

A perceptible but speechless movement took place among them. Things were beginning to look serious. The know-

* Distorted.

† Rock.

ledge that he was in all probability not only the husband of the lady who had so alarmed them before, but a supernatural being in his own right as well, rendered him formidable indeed.

"I won't be trifled with!" he said with a sudden exclamation. "Will you come or I'll—"

But before he could finish his endearing speech the awe-stricken party of children again had recourse to flight, and disappeared like rats in the growing darkness and intricacies of the passage. This time they made no stop whatever till they reached their homes down at the bottom of the valley in the midst of the fog. None of them this time had humanity enough left to dream of looking after the young one. Fortunately he was far too terrified to collect his scattered senses even sufficiently to remember the way to scream—or "yelp," as his comrades would have called it. Being in consequence under no necessity to loiter, and being also "fleeter of foot than the fleet-foot kid," he ran faster than any of them. Once safely housed, they all narrated what had happened to them—although with more or less of embellishment—how they had met Mrs. Thurlstone, who, as one said with graphic descriptive powers, "girned an' glinted at 'un" as they ran away from her; and how they had "vrecked her" * afterwards, and seen her go up "th' wallopin' Skart" with Arthur Haenton. One may be certain they in no way omitted how they had seen her kissing the blind man's hand, and how they had met her "buddled" husband immediately afterwards, "in a vusting fume wi' hisen back zet up vinely."

* Watched.

Now their innocent ideas concerning what they called the “puzzumfulness*” of the witch, their different mothers (possibly anxious to encourage in the hearts of their irrepressible offspring a desire for less irregular night hours) in no way attempted to qualify, whatever might have been their united speculations on the subject of the remaining statements; for Devonshire housewives (like others of their sisters) had, in those far-off days, a remarkable weakness for what they called “pistering an’ whistering, eart one eart t’other”—or what we should now term talking scandal together—about things which in no wise concerned them.

CHAPTER IV.

MIST AND MOONLIGHT.

THE white mist over the sea threw a vague motionless reflexion over the under sides of the rocks on the beetling cliff; everything had slowly grown dark and the faint clusters of stars were breaking out in the cloudless firmament. A silent ineffable immensity seemed to be spread over all the devious scenery, half visible as it was now in the sombreness of the night. The margins of the mist and sky, and the dark protruding edges of the rock, even the outline of the man who stood on the path, appeared all melted into each other and blended together; no visible thing seemed to have beginning or end.

* Spitefulness.

The moon must by now have been rising over the inland hills, but its light in no way reached Thurlstone. He stood there quite still, for a moment looking down the passage where the children had disappeared as if uncertain what to do; then he turned and still proceeded rapidly along. He must have known the way well, or else have been sustained by nervous excitement, for it was so obscure that he could hardly see his feet. Right in front of him, however, as he came round a sudden turning, he saw the path winding up and down in a serpentine fashion, for, the reflection of the mist not being able to reach it, it stood out like a dark line on the face of the precipice. The faint stars grew brighter and brighter overhead, and he could hear the weltering and seething of the waves far down the side, as he still strode hurriedly along without caution. Once his heavy footsteps detached a fragment of rock which sank with a prolonged rattling into the abyss of vapour below, and created strange muffled echoes in its descent. All under the cliff-side till far out towards the horizon was deep in shadow now; beyond this the blanched light of the moon was dispersed from over the high upper crags.

At last he came in sight of the gloomy detached mass of the Castle-Rock standing by itself on the edge of the furze-covered plateau. The hollows and indentations of the here visible valley are very deep about this place; no light reached it, it was profoundly dark. The rock itself was in the shadow of the hills behind; its base, with the fern-covered sterile land it rose from, was in the deepest obscurity. On the side which faced seawards

a faint reflection was derived from the clouds of white fog.

Against the pale solemn light still lingering in the sky beyond, its solitary outline rose: the jagged prominent masses of stone being blurred here and there by thin fringe of ferns and thistles. In one place the picturesque outline of a gnarled old blackthorn was visible, grown all aslant in the direction from which the sea-wind perpetually blew: in the gloom that concealed the side that was nearest to him, faint white traces like those of a winding path seemed indicated. The great cloven rocks, piled one on another as though by human agency, which crowned its summit, were white with the soft liquid moonlight which now began to fall on them.

He stopped considering the place for an instant. “Can they be up *there?*” he muttered to himself; but the crag, defined in dim light against the star-strewn sky, silent and sombre, divulged no secrets.

Then, as hastily as before, he strode round the boulders of rock the way wound past, and losing his path in the dusk got deep into the midst of the ferns and grass. At one time he stepped down the side of a hollow, and fouled his feet in a small quagmire caused by the late rain: then he got into a clump of stunted thorns, and his footsteps made a sharp rustling sound—which he evidently wished to avoid, for he commenced treading more cautiously. His eyes were turned searchingly to where he still saw the dim indications of a path. Presently they disappeared; some great black substance like a rock loomed up before his sight; he reached it and laid his hand on its cold rough side. The stone was twice as high as himself; he re-

mained there a moment leaning with his shoulder as though to gain breath.

“A blind man like him makes up for want of sight in plenty of other ways. I must go more quietly or I shall alarm them. She’d spring over the rocks and escape with him—she’s quite capable of it. Oh Helen, Helen, Helen! why have you betrayed me? My heart’s torn and bleeding ‘for you !’” The first sentence was spoken to himself, the rest was almost out loud as though he were addressing some one beside him. There seemed a terrible sorrow revealed in the way he suddenly pronounced this name and struck his forehead with the palms of his hands. Then he began silently to skirt round the boulder till he was free from it and once more in sight of the path he wished to surmount. He could just dimly make out the different forms he was surrounded by: stumbling over the rough ground, as he was, it appeared almost impossible to proceed in the noiseless manner he wished. Once he stopped, exclaiming, “Damn these glow-worms ! they’ll throw light over me :” and he tried to stamp on one of them as he passed, for a faint reflection was really thrown over his feet by the insects’ dim radiance. They seemed quite countless ; it was singular to watch the way the cold flecks of light lit up the tracery of the thorns and brambles in which they hung. The mingled light of a whole cluster right in front of him half-illuminated the roots of a thick blackberry bush at the foot of another rock ; and in diverging round to avoid it his foot stumbled and he fell over a smaller fragment. His hand was cut deeply so that it bled ; but without noticing the pain he rose, and, treading cautiously across the rocks with which the place he

now stood on was all overstrewn, at last got on to the path.

Just at that instant as he stood upright (for all the while before he had been bending low down to make certain of his footsteps), a weird depressed sound like a woman singing under her breath became audible in the intense silence and gloom. It was a wailing unnatural and tuneless dirge, which seemed as though it must appertain to the lips of some spiritual guardian of that wild place, rather than to the throat of a human being. It made him shudder, but something moved him even more when he heard the low sweet sound of laughter which followed.

The strong-limbed bearded man trembled till he nearly lost his balance: he clutched hold of a rock near him to steady himself, and bruised his hard fingers from the tenacity with which he grasped it. His eyes glittered upwards in the darkness with a deadly gleam. Then, as if electrified by a sudden resolution, he rose right up, determined to repress all outward signs of emotion. Steadying himself with his hands and arms, he once more began to ascend, or rather glide up the path with feet which seemed to have grown as light and confident as a panther's. His breathing was hard and suppressed.

The path wound in difficult turns round over the rocks; sometimes ascending, at others level for a space. At last, without even seeming to have looked where he was going, he found he had nearly reached the topmost height. He paused, looking and listening keenly till he heard the low softened intonation of human voices.

On the overhanging crag which forms the summit lies a huge cloven rock; its two sinistral fragments stand side by

side, like roughly-hewn portals with a narrow passage between. A third slab leans slantingly on their tops from edge to edge, thus forming (unless the wind and rain should blow right through) a completely sheltered recess in which people can sit looking down on the sea and sky far below. Inside, just at the mouth, another but much smaller fragment of stone has fallen, forming a convenient seat. Several less important rocks are piled up round the outside as if for support, but the whole formation of the place is dashed together with a reckless irregularity which only Nature herself could place reliance in. Right in front of these strange rocks, as they face seawards, lies a small platform of turf; beyond this the sheer beetling abyss slopes down to where the grey angry waves perpetually surge among the black sea-weed foliage which grows over the boulders at the base. The narrow shore is hidden under the cliff and cannot be seen.

The moonlight was sinking slowly down the path, and it fell on Thurlstone as he emerged out of the deep shadow cast on the side, seeming to detach a fragment of it with him in his own shadow which fell simultaneously on the light stones. He still ascended noiselessly till he could see through the entrance.

CHAPTER V.

* * * *

Its inner walls and roof were deep in shadow, so that they formed a kind of black ebony framework against the sky ; inside this were the dark clearly-defined outlines of two figures sitting clasped together on the stone seat at the entrance. Murmuring together in sweet and blended tones of love and laughter, they seemed to exhale an atmosphere of rapturous ecstasy. His wife's arms were entwined round the blind poet's neck, her cheek was pressed fondly to his, and her long dishevelled hair was spread out over his shoulders and round his neck. They were quite still. Only once while he stood there were the consummate lines of this gracious picture disarranged, as the woman's beautiful profile appeared for a moment while she pressed her lips under her lover's chin. Doing this she disturbed the rippling tresses of her hair, and it fell off his shoulder.

The great black rock which was suspended over their heads looked as though it were every instant about to fall and crush them for their unconscious sin.

Helen's husband stood outside in the moonlight unmindful of the place he was in and the profound obscurity of the abysses under his feet,—without ear for the desultory beating of the sea under its mantle of fog, and without knowledge of the stupendous silence of the star-strewn heaven overhead. Everything in outer nature had suddenly

lost its existence or reality to him—all his faculties were concentrated on the spectacle before him. Its black outlines seemed to merge into consuming lines of fire which burnt into his brain. The sky was very luminous beyond the dark walls of the cavern: the two heads were as if crowned with a brilliant cluster of stars, some of which appeared to hang like blossoms festooned in Helen's loosened hair as they were seen through its openings. He remained there watching them motionless as a statue, with a long black shadow extending from him over the moonlit stones, his heart scarce beating, his lips forgetting to inhale his life-breath, and his feet as if rooted to the solid rock on which he stood.

These two lovers, while their minds were involved in the delirious intoxication of reciprocal passion, how little they dreamt what the fulfilment of fate had in store for them! There was no concealment between their hearts, each mingled with free speech in the other's confidence. The man watched them and listened to their enraptured words as though he were paralysed by his conflicting passions and could only stand there helplessly.

At last his constrained inaction became dreadful, contrasted with their freedom. In the darkness and silence of the night it would be impossible to describe how utterly they would be under his power whenever he chose to interrupt them. If a painter could have caught the essential grace of the picture on which Thurlstone gazed with such bewildered eyes, his work would have set a stamp upon his name for ever: perhaps the man saw this himself, for he compressed his teeth and lips terribly, to restrain some sigh or groan which struggled to find its way out of his

panting heart; and he seemed in no degree to gain the resolution requisite to disturb it.

All round him the intense darkness of the night was being slowly dispelled. Towards the north-east the enlarged watery disk of the moon swam through the silver bands of mist which had been exhaled from the hills in the moist evening air; each moment the wan glittering circle rose higher in the luminous heaven, and lessened in size as it left the vapours below. The full bright light stole lower and lower, and imperceptibly drove the receding shadows down the sun-bleached sides of the high crags. The strange summit of the Castle-Rock was wildly dashed with light and shade; the ravine it stood at the head of was still immersed in profoundest gloom.

Suddenly as the man stood there he heard far off in the distance the measured solemn vibration of a clock, as it slowly beat out the hour in some remote village belfry. The sound came from the direction of the lonely church at Countisbury; what hour it struck was impossible to determine, for the strokes were all mingled together in the one common reverberation which lingered among the rocky hills they passed over. In the disturbed state of his brain, it seemed a mysterious indecipherable warning as from some other long-forgotten world which he had once lived in,—an enigma as weird as the solitary dashing of the water which resounded so faintly from the shore beneath him. One hour nearer the end had sounded.

This noise, reminding him as it were that other people existed in the world besides the two before him, roused him a little out of his fierce bewilderment; but he still

remained perfectly silent as he gazed on them. Some connected purpose began to shape itself in his brain. Once his face turned till the moonlight fell upon the features; there was a wild contrast between the black bushy beard and the colourless forehead; while his eyes glittered under his deep brows until they seemed to overflow with fire. This must have been the moment in his life in which he found his vague dreams merge into absolute certainty, or it could never have acted thus upon a resolute man such as he seemed to be. He must have loved her very deeply. His sun-browned hands were clutched convulsively behind his back, with a kind of nervous twitching in the fingers; one foot was advanced as though he were minded to go to them, did not some irresistible power hold him back. His feet were wet with the dew and the swampy grass he had trodden through; he had not changed his position since he first caught sight of them.

He stood full in the light without thought of concealment. If Helen had turned her head she must unfailingly have seen him; if Haenton had listened he might have heard his breathing: but they were too infatuated, too much immersed in themselves, for that. Once the young man's head turned on Helen's shoulder, and he seemed to look full on Thurlstone (who saw his rival's face distinctly), but the latter altered his position after a minute. Thurlstone never started or moved.

“Don't you hear the old Countisbury church-clock striking? it must be ten. You'll have to lead me home, Arthur, since you know the ground so well, for it's dark all over down below. How unutterably secure and happy one feels up here!” said poor Helen, breaking the long and

rapturous silence which had lasted between them, with a kind of lingering sigh. There is more meaning in a half-hour's silence between two human beings who love each other than in a whole day's conversation between ordinary men and women. Silence and love are inseparable.

“ Oh how I adore you ! ” the girl went on, now she had once broken the spell. “ Look ! I'll wind all my long tresses round your neck, and strangle you ; I'll make you more effectually mine than even our coming marriage will. You'll never be able to play false and fair with me again, or change your mind.

“ Love is a desultory fire,
Blown by a wind made musical with sighs ;
A void and wonderfully vague desire,
Which comes and flies.

“ Of once-sown passion who knows what the crop is ?
Alas ! my love, love's eyes are very blind.
What would they have us do ? Sunflowers and poppies
Stoop with the wind.”

She was running her slender fingers through his hair as she sang this in her sweet soprano voice. Then she began hanging her own hair round his throat and shoulders ; then, desisting from this singular, if satisfactory occupation, she commenced laughing. The other said nothing, but submitted quite passively to such whimsical vagaries as his mistress chose to indulge in. He seemed sunk in a reverie from which she evidently wished to rouse him, for she continued talking, always with the same subtle elation quivering through her voice.

“ Oh Haenton, Haenton ! what a bitter, bitter mockery

the unknown love I always bore for you made my marriage seem to me! I know now what it was that made me so rebellious against myself. I half forgot your very existence; but I never forgot for one instant the passion that always slumbered so restlessly in my heart, even if I didn't know what I yearned for. It all burst into flame at last, when I saw you—met you by accident on the heath. I often wondered what I had been made for till then, when all doubt was solved and rendered impossible."

"*I never forgot you, Helen; how could I have done so?*" There was a wild burst of energy in the way he said this. "There's no use for me in this world; what have I got to live for but you? Even my poetry was made by the remembrance of your singing, as you used to sing to me when we were children wandering over Dartmoor. Even that grew as weary as everything else, till I found you. You alone have reconciled me to life, Nelly; I should have died long ago save for you."

Her hair, which still remained clustered over his neck, slid off with a faint rustling, disarranged by the energy with which he spoke. Helen took up his slim fingers gently into her own as if to calm him. Presently he lifted his beautiful hands up (all poets can be known by their hands) and put them to her forehead so as to bring her face nearer to his own. Then he pressed his lips on her temples for a moment, and passed his fingers over her face as if to assure himself that its shape was unaltered.

If Helen had looked back through the rocks, she would have seen a man pressing his hands over his face, as though to shut out some sight he dared not look upon; but she only began talking with even more vivacity than usual.

“ What utter nonsense the solemnities of our lives are sometimes! Ah! what irony! How I used to amuse myself with his supplicating eyes, and the kisses he would print on my fingers whenever I let him! You needn’t look so jealous—it was very seldom, Arthur. Ah! a single kiss like that elated his heart and tantalized him for weeks; then he thought I would not have him after all. Heigho! Fancy fooling a strong man like him in that fashion! Poor fellow, I couldn’t help being a little compassionate at last. When he *was* engaged to me, I made him eat some of my dried-up night-shade berries as a pledge, I said; I told him that was what he must expect from me. They made his poor brain as dizzy as the topmost bough of an aspen in a high wind; but nothing could make him understand what I was. I remember it was mid-winter then; all the deepest snow-drifts lay round our house; it had left off falling though for nine days. Ah, what a wonderful sight it was to see the wind blowing it in clouds off the summits of the hills! The roads across the moor were worse than impassable, and uncle coming from town was detained at an inn for more than a week before he could leave for home. Just fancy Uncle Serleton left all alone in a moorland inn without even his books! My sweet cousin Leah, and nurse, Margery Wilmot as she was called, were left with me for company—one frightened out of her wits, the other lowering as usual. Just then he came after I hadn’t seen him for a week. I’d told him to go and look after uncle, and he came back with him. He never once let uncle out of his sight after he found him. Beyond that news he merely said he was come to bid me good-bye, for he was going away to where he’d come from

to woo me—the other side of the world. It would have been better for him if he had, for I don't think he would be lying under the sea now. Well, I told him to find his way out through the snow and into the wood, and look about him. If he could find and pluck me some fresh-flowering night-shade just in blossom among the avraurt, I said I'd relent and consent to love him; *never before*. One might have thought he was cursing under his breath from the look of his face, and then a sudden revulsion of contempt seemed to master him. What impulse was it caused me to run out and follow his footsteps between the drifts? God only knows. I think it was the look of indifference he threw upon me just before going. Oh I recollect it all so plainly! 'twas only three years ago."

Did the man who watched her recollect it, too?

"When we came back it was settled that I was to be his wife," Helen resumed. "But he was an infatuated fool—a fool—a fool! Nothing alarmed him. Nothing showed him how unfit I was for him. They all looked so startled when they found which way the wind blew at last. Poor Leah, she really was in love with him. I tried to make him marry her, but he wouldn't hear of it. Then she aggravated me. I gave that up and took him myself. That's how I come to be a widow, Haenton. How can one account for one's disposition? I think my inclination points the way the wind blows, it's always changing so."

"I think it always moves against the wind, Helen," said Haenton, "though you've never opposed *me*."

"That's because I love you so. What's put you out of temper, eh? Listen; I'll try and sing you one of your old songs, shall I?"

Among the harsh outlines of the rocks there swept a sustained thrill of harmony which invested them with a magic beyond all conception ; it was the prelude of her song. The sound mingled with the night-air and seemed to pervade the whole place like a wonderfully-scented rain. But Helen's voice thrilling among the moonlit boulders of the desolate crag ceased suddenly before any distinct word was pronounced. "Hush!" she said. "What's that?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST.

EVERY word she uttered created some answering echo ; there was a perfect swirl of lingering sound among the rocks round her now that she became silent, as though a wild gust of wind were blowing through them. It was very weird to listen to ; it seemed as if the very stones were mocking her, so distinct was the repetition of her sudden exclamation. The man outside saw her lay her graceful hand over the poet's lips, while she appeared to be listening as though she expected some sound, which had disquieted her, to recommence. The luminous sky against which the upper portions of their forms were defined, had grown still clearer than before, so that he saw them more and more distinctly. The woman's profile was turned towards him.

From the path along the precipitous face of the cliff

the deep baying of a dog resounded ; then it ceased. In a while it recommenced till the cannonless embrasures of the beetling crags reverberated again and again. The animal was evidently approaching the rock as though following one of them ; when it ceased baying, its deep panting could be heard, so intense was the silence.

“ My God, no ! it can’t be ! ” exclaimed Helen hurriedly as she half rose, still with her arm on Haenton’s neck. She turned round. Doing so, and still listening in a startled way, she caught sight of the man’s figure ; she must have recognised him instantly, for she greeted him with a bewildered scream.

“ Ay, it’s my dog, Helen. We’ve both been half-drowned, but we’ve come home again : he has been very faithful to me, but then, you see, he’s only a dumb animal.” He said this with a great effort to articulate calmly, which was very evident. “ You seem well prepared to welcome me. Who’s that man there ? ”

A slight palpitation was in his half-ironical voice, as he said this and pointed enquiringly to where Haenton was standing : he was holding his hands out in a bewildered way towards where the woman had been sitting, for she was no longer by his side..

There was dignity in Thurlstone’s voice and figure as he stood there. Nothing in the world is more ennobling than an unmerited injury.

Mrs. Thurlstone had started up suddenly, and with an instinctive effort to conceal her lover behind her dress and hands, and even her hair. It was terrible.

As her husband spoke she gave a second shrill cry or scream, like that of a despairing animal, and passed over the

fragment of rock they had been sitting on, so as to keep herself in front of the blind man. Then she came out unhesitatingly into the moonlight where her husband was. There was a wildly blended look of defiance and terror in her pale face, and her eyes flashed fiercely. All colour had receded from her pallid cheeks ; her lips were bloodless, and her heart was palpitating like a wounded swan's.

“ Spare him, oh spare him ! He is not a man like you. I placed myself under your direction, I know, and I am weak as only a woman is ; but if you touch one hair of his head, Oh God, you shall rue it ! I'll wind all my own hair round your throat in the night, and strangle you while you are sleeping ! How was I to guess you were coming back from the jaws of death to blast the only happiness I care for in life ? ”

“ Good God, indeed ! and this is all the return you give me for all the years of love I have wasted on you ! You tell me to my face that I destroy your happiness,” the man interrupted in a wild strident voice that rang sharply among the rocks surrounding them, while he made a step towards her. She recoiled from him, but it was only to get more in front of Haenton. As her husband stood looking on her he seemed for an instant about to catch her up in his arms, but the impulse left him.

Just then the same deep baying of a dog rose under their feet, as if in answer to its master's voice; then a large fawn-coloured blood-hound sprang up the path into the light, and lay down panting beside him, with its red thirsty tongue lolling out from under its white teeth. The animal eyed the woman curiously for a moment and seemed to recognise

her, for it went up in a dog-like way and sniffed at her skirts and put its head up in expectation of a caress.

“Look you !” said Thurlstone with a deep and quivering voice. “I love you still, Helen, come what may, so I won’t give you any opportunity for inventing lies. There need be no prevarication between us, Helen. Either you come home with me to Waters-meet,—follow me now,—or, by the heaven above us and the God who made your body in heaven and your soul in hell, I’ll cast the blind man there off this summit down through the mist on to the sea-rocks ! Will you come quietly, Helen, or not ? Take your choice. Otherwise I’ll go back to Australia, for no one could blame or punish me, I know very well, and I don’t care if they can !”

There was a violent fit of shuddering all through the woman’s slender form, and the crag vibrated again with a cry. She put her gracile hands up to her eyes as though she were dizzy. “Oh I shall go mad ! My heart’s bursting !” was all she said : she stood irresolutely for a moment, and then burst into tears. Perhaps the poor girl’s imagination pictured a little swirl of blood staining the sea-water below, for still shuddering she made a movement as though she would consent to follow her husband. She cast an imploring look behind her to where she had left her lover, and seemed to be about to speak, and then stopped, evidently to avoid calling Thurlstone’s attention towards him.

They both stood facing each other still a little while longer. A pair of evil-looking black-feathered birds, seen dimly in the moonlight, were balancing themselves on the angle of the white rock overhead, and twisting their black beaks on one side to gaze down on them. They seemed to

be sleepily taking note of what was passing beneath, and croaking drowsy comments to each other. These birds were a couple of ravens, and had probably been disturbed from the nest they had built in one of the clefts: there was something indescribably sinister in their sudden appearance at such a juncture.

“Remember!” said Thurlstone sternly with a look towards where Haenton was. Helen started again with a shudder, but this time she suppressed any cry she might have uttered. Then they went down the path together, he in front and she following, for she was in deadly fear lest he should turn back if he got between her and her blind lover. The dog went last of all, still smelling the hem of her garment. The last that was plainly seen of them, just before they plunged into the shadow, was a glimpse of Helen’s bloodless face turned upwards to where she had left Haenton. There was a mute deplored look of horror wildly depicted in the beautiful features. It was only visible for an instant—then she disappeared.

Arthur Haenton had groped his way between the cleft in the two great rocks, and now he managed to find where he was and stagger out into the moonlight. Then he paused near the margin of the great flat stone he stood on, and felt before him with imploring hands. There was a wild horrified look on his pale face, and the perspiration could be seen gleaming over his forehead as though it were laden with dew.

“Helen! Helen! where are you?” he exclaimed beseechingly: and the wildly importunate sound echoed round him in a still wilder malice of mockery—“Helen! Helen! where are you?” Then it died away.

He only heard a woman's voice receding in the distance and sobbing hysterically. The poet was left alone in his blindness on the topmost crag which crowned the cloven summit of the Castle-Rock. From the stone over his head he heard the sinister croaking of the two ravens.

CONCLUSION.

“AND what became of Helen?” asks the reader; “Helen—the Lady of Waters-meet; whose birth, parentage, and even ancestry, have been traced step by step in the previous chapters of this history; Helen, the development of whose character has been set forth in the book entitled ‘The Growth of a Soul.’ And what became of Arthur Haenton the blind poet?”

The reader must have seen enough of these two to know that they were foredoomed—predestined to the usual fate that awaits genius and all over-sensitive and over-passionate natures; that awaits many poets; that awaits the song-bird destined to be snared, and to beat out its life against the bars of its cage; that awaits its mate destined to pine for her and die.

Helen, taken home by her husband, watched in vain for some opportunity of conveying a message to her lover—for some chance of escape. Thurlstone, while not a brute, not one exactly to wreak a mean revenge on her who

was now in his power, was nevertheless not the man to suffer his wife a second time to trifle with his just indignation. Helen, finding herself watched night and day—held in unseen bands—chafed at the restraint till her febrile and excitable temperament superinduced brain-fever. In an access of this, during the somnolence of her nurse, *she strangled herself with her hair*—the same beautiful hair which used in childhood to cause her such terror.

Arthur, when left alone with the ravens on the Castle-Rock, was in no physical distress as to his way down the difficult path, every step of which he knew, and through which, as Helen had said, he would have had to guide her as the night grew darker; but his soul, deprived of her lighting, was left blinder and darker than his eyes or the way he had to tread.

Fearful of embittering Helen's already cruel enough condition, he for many days forbore to seek for intelligence of her—to question those about him, who were glad enough to avoid the task of repeating to him the dark whispers that went around. But he wandered about the well-known, well-loved paths he had so often trodden with his love.

There is a narrow zigzag footway that leads up the side of the rocks which overhang the sea. This at the time of our narrative was the only road connecting Lynmouth with the town of Linton on the heights above. A thick hedge had been planted on the outside of the roadway, giving security, and shielding the passer-by from the dizziness that might otherwise overtake him while peering down the precipice by his side. Between this hedge and the abrupt wall of cliffs on the other hand there is barely room

for more than two, certainly not for more than three, persons to walk abreast. Down this steep lane Haenton was finding his way one afternoon. The blind must ever be in the open air ; there they, so to speak, *inhale* the expanse of scenery the beauties of which it is denied then to *see*. As he walked, his quick ear warned him of a number of people approaching him in the opposite direction from below. It was a funeral, and in the straitness of the way, the blind man had to *feel* the coffin as it was borne by : asking one of the followers whose funeral it was, he was answered “Mrs. Thurstone’s of the Waters-meet.”

With their brief joys, their unrestrained affection, and the unforeseen catastrophe on the Castle-Rock, this tale properly ends. It was never in its scope to trace all the bitter agony, to chronicle one by one all the cruel throes, that invaded the poet’s heart along with this immitigable blow.

With but one sense remaining, that of needed self-mastery, both out of regard for her memory, and from that impulse which never in any case forsakes delicate natures, he held his peace :—when the cortège was past, he followed it at some distance, but in lieu of taking with it the turn to the graveyard of Linton Church whither it was bound, he staggered on alone in the twilight and coming gloom (what was gloom or daylight to him ever ? what was it now ?) up on to Exmoor. There for three days he abode among the wild ponies and wilder forest-animals ; avoiding by his ear the approach of human beings ; quenching his thirst when he chanced to stumble upon quagmires and pools left by the rain. On the third night, with abated speed and strength almost exhausted, he found

his way back to Linton Church-yard, and groped and stumbled madly for many hours among the gravestones and grass-mounds, vainly seeking for her grave to die upon. When nigh spent he came upon a newly raised mound ; a large branch or bunch of the deadly nightshade, the "Dwale Bluth" he knew so well, had been planted on it. Was it some pitying friend's hand that had planted it there in remembrance of her strangeness and poetry ? was it her husband who had placed it in token of her waywardness and his love ? This is not known. Arthur, who was dying of inanition, ravenously ate of the berries. They appeased his craving for food, they appeased his longing for death. It was a sacrifice to *her* shade, and *he* was the victim.

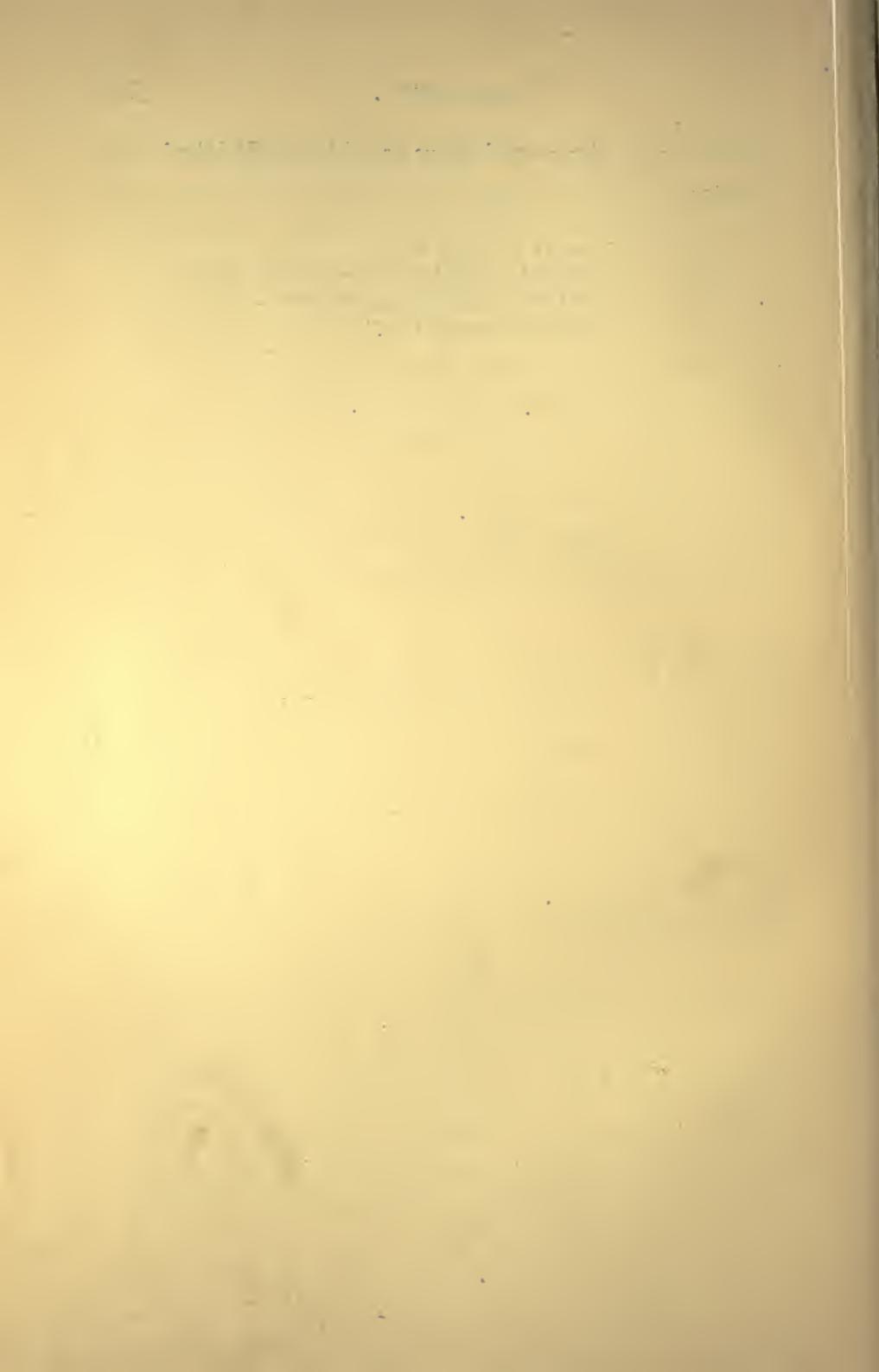
Soon the berries of the belladonna began to tell upon him ; he no longer felt the cold soil, he no longer smelt the cold damp earth ; he was seated on the cliffs overhanging the sea. Helen was with him : again she described to him the glories of the sunset ; again she kissed his hands and wound her beautiful locks round his neck as though to strangle him—in laughter : again she sang to him with her silver voice, and chanted her newest-made verses. She seemed gradually to be suffocating him deliciously with more and more love.

Shall we pity the poet that his agony is now over ? Shall we grudge the lover the union for eternity with his mistress ? and everlasting peace to the hunted fugitive ? Rather let us seek out their graves (for there they lie side by side by the husband's own direction) and see that the grass is trimmed there, and the head-stones still upright, and the willow-tree still healthy and weeping

its leaves on them—and there recall to mind Helen's own song—

“Love is a desultory fire,
Blown by a wind made musical with sighs,
A void and wonderfully vague desire—
Which comes and flies.”

END OF THE DWALE BLUTH



HEBDITCH'S LEGACY.

HEBDITCH'S LEGACY.

INTRODUCTION.

“Strange sleep,
Which, when the voices of the desert fail,
Wraps all in its own dread eternity!”

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH A FOG RISES.

EARLY one November afternoon, now left some thirty-five years behind us in the remorseless flight of time, an immense, squalid volume of fog swept down across the central parishes of London ; blocking out the residue of the brief wintry sunlight, and suffocating their crowded, tumultuous thoroughfares. It was as though some horrid dream, some diurnal nightmare, had suddenly enthralled the town ; it was *tohu va bohu* realized again, for London is essentially the city of dyspepsia—of morbid self-torturing imagination ; and there are certain days towards the fall of the year on which its sense of degradation and of misery appears to transcend all bounds—grown too uncontrollably

poignant even for suppression. Sinister and poisonous and hiding the sun away, it seemed just such a vapour as that which once upon a time rolled forth and embodied itself from the magic jar of Suleyman—unsealed by the Arab fisherman—a sullen, long-imprisoned monster, an Efreet, consecrating its recovered liberty only in the blood of its deliverer. Or it was as though the houses had been swept off the visible face of the earth by some stupendous conflagration,—emptied and dissolved into the drifts of lurid smoke that yet enwrapped their ruins . . . All the atmosphere was full of vague palpitating sounds and rumours. In the streets (save for the city link-bearers, round whose torches the flame-irradiated vapour—*florentia lumina flammis*—seemed to take fire and glare so fantastically) men lost sight of each other's corporeal identities, or shrank into mere sound-creating shadows. Every visible object became the disembodied phantom of some former self. The fog was at its worst round Chancery Lane; a district then environed by a secluded, crapulous labyrinth of streets and alleys, which seemed better adapted to the necessities of a colony of toads than to the “swarming” of human beings they then gave shelter to; a district pestilential enough in fact, even without the fog which now hung over it so impenetrably.

Ere long, the whole centre of London seethed into one illimitable chaos.

* * * * *

Clifford's Inn, never an animated spot at the brightest seasons, under the paralysing unwholesome tutelage of this fog, grew dreary and dilapidated indeed. The soot-

corroded corners of its houses looked gloomily through the nauseous obscurity ; the skeleton-silhouettes of what were once its trees (dotted still with the last nests of a once populous rookery, clothed with fog in lieu of foliage, and shrivelled in their winter's atrophy) looked more like weeds, stagnating in the mud-discoloured depths of some Brobdingnagian horsepond. What the rooks, which then patronized the "Inn," did with themselves that day, Heaven alone knows ! At last, towards four,—saving one dimly-lighted window, whose vague rays produced an aureole round its sills such as might once have graced the brows of a rebellious angel,—its whole interior courtyards were blurred together and blotted out of sight.

Late that afternoon a man sat facing this window, leaning on a desk covered with papers, looking abstractedly before him.

The room—evidently a lawyer's office—was otherwise vacant, and was bitterly cold, too ; the light of his lamp fell full on his face, in which that strange look theoretically so essential to success in life, the look of the man who knows the value of silence, was unmistakably visible. For success, in its ordinary sense, consists not so much in talking yourself as in making others talk. This man's swarthy skin, emphasising the greyness of his hair, plainly indicated the traces of some foreign (perhaps even eastern) blood in his veins ; his eyes, grey, piercingly luminous, and never still for an instant, possessed that penetrating yet indirect look which we inseparably connect with the oriental physiognomy. Not the faintest shadow of an emotion seemed discernible in them. His black crooked

shadow, cast high up on the wall behind, craned over him furtively ; so still and motionless that it grew at last like some evil familiar spirit, trying to guess what new wizardry its master could have found to ponder over.

Outside the fog grew worse and worse. He had been leaning there some time now ; when suddenly there came a loud rattling on the flag-stones just beneath the office, evidently from the feet of some stranger (misled in the obscurity, or searching for the names on the door-posts) who could be heard wheezing and coughing as the vapour forced its way into his throat. In a while these footsteps turned back and came tramping round into the open passage of the house, followed by a sudden, startlingly demonstrative summons at the door of the damp, worm-eaten landing-place above,—at the door of the rooms in which this man sat. He rose in an instant. All men given to deep reveries are of a nervous temperament. Crossing the room into its outer chamber he flung open the door hurriedly, when he found himself face to face with a second man, heavily-clad, a long whip in his hand ; who cleared his throat, accosting him huskily :

“ Your name Mr. Blackoder ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ A lady called me off the stand and sent me with this letter, sir. There was great haste.”

So saying, he produced a folded paper from some mysterious recess in his coat, which he handed to the person addressed, who took it back calmly to where the light stood.

There he tore open and read its two or three hurriedly scrawled lines.

“Your sister has been taken ill again, quite suddenly, and is dying, we think. She expresses dreadful anxiety to see you, and seems half delirious; come home immediately.

“Dr. Crashaw is just here.

“H. B.”

As he glanced through these ominous and almost illegible sentences, a perceptible change passed over his features. It was as though the white paper cast a still whiter reflection across them. One can rarely tell what such a look means at heart, nor is the eye ever utterly under control; but there was a gleam in this man's such as we seldom notice among Londoners. Even the messenger at the door seemed struck by the look of his face, and stared curiously at him.

It was only momentary, however.

“Is your cab here?” the one addressed as Mr. Blackoder inquired curtly, buttoning his coat up round his chin as he spoke.

“At the corner, in Fleet Street, sir.”

Then putting out the light and locking the office-doors, they both, without another word spoken, went hurriedly out into the fog.

CHAPTER II.

WHERE THE SUN KEEPS SILENT.

“ OH Crayston ! Crayston ! it must be done ! When he was born they scarce expected him to live ; you wished him not to, and I said he *should* live ; and see what he has grown to, now ! . . .

“ Oh it would be too cruel ! You made *me* marry against my will ! Both would be wretched as I was—both sacrificed,—both ! And what would they come to think of *me* ?—*I who caused it* ?

“ Oh too cruel—too cruel ! I will never consent to it !

“ Never ! never ! ”

These last words were well-nigh inaudible.

Yet there was a keen, indescribable emphasis in them ; for they were uttered by a woman who lay stretched out in her bed, *shored up* with pillows, to use a technical expression ; too weak almost for movement, her hands tossing restlessly from side to side, and with her head fallen backwards over one shoulder, in sheer debility ; a woman whose soul, now only awaiting the summons to enter, had evidently knocked long since at the gates of eternity.

She was talking to herself.

Nothing in all nature seems more weird or fantastic than the delirium, born of prolonged exhaustion, which so often precedes the death brought about by consumption. Perhaps one should hardly term it delirium at all ; as the mind breaks down with the failure of the body, its imagination seems to strengthen and gain force, until at last the

sense of life merges into a dream and the profound last sleep falls upon it. A form of death long drawn out and with an incredibly unexpected ending ! The whole room was filled with her quick, difficult breathing,—it was like the rasping of a file. To judge from her face she must have been young still—scarcely thirty-three, perhaps. Once she might have been beautiful, but now, her features were emaciated in the extreme, the eyes sunken, and the cheeks utterly hollowed and wasted away. For others, the light and frivolity of life ; for her, the solemnity and pathos of death ; for others the radiance—for her the *silence*, of the sun. At times one can discover beauty in a dying face such as might baffle description. The complexion grows so diaphanous, the eyes glitter so strangely, that quite at last the first vague rays of some new existence seem fallen on the features.

“Some say that gleams of a remoter world
Visit the soul in sleep,—that death is slumber ;
And that its dreams the busy thoughts outnumber
Of those that wake and live.” .

Or it often happens that the act of death looks as though the body were dissolving away and leaving the soul behind—rather than the soul the body.

But here it was otherwise : a profound unendurable horror of death, as it were, lay on all the features—death, which had stamped them for its own so unmistakably ; her lips quivering and muttering incessantly, her eyes dilated and filled with sombre, unluminous fire, as though her whole life had been as a flame—self-consuming—and those eyes were the last particles left of it.

Outside, the yellow fog of that drear November afternoon surged impatiently up against the windows of the room in which she lay ; menacing and ominous and gloom-stricken, it was a strange atmosphere to quench the God-like radiance of a human soul in ! It had even gnawed through, hungrily, as an animal after its prey, into the death chamber itself ; impatient of further delay ; clinging about the walls, a blue filmy web woven by some visionary spider, and set to catch the sufferer's soul in. It made the very fire-light burn to a ghastly blue ; indeed it was visibly suffocating the woman, her voice was scarcely audible. But presently her disconnected utterances ceased. As the last word left her lips, a startled spasmodic movement shot through her whole body ; as though her soul, struck suddenly dead, were uttering some last protest from the darkness it had whirled into : then she appeared to come to life again, and bent suddenly forwards, looking dizzily round the room, unable at first to recognize it perhaps. For a time her delirium had quitted her. There were two persons who had been watching over the sufferer beside the bed at that moment ; the first a lady, whose face bore that expression one meets so often in women, of a once strong will conquered by a still stronger ; the other, an elderly grey-haired man—evidently a physician.

“ Has he not come, Helen, even yet ? ” the invalid muttered at last, looking up in the lady's face, still with the same strange expression in her own, and in a tone so breathless that its meaning seemed comprised more in the movement of her lips than in their voice.

She appeared to read the answer in her looks alone ;

neither spoke, and her head sank back wearily among the pillows.

It seemed as if she were falling asleep again.

CHAPTER III.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

MEANWHILE a cab had been driving slowly through the streets, nearing every moment the house in which this woman lay. Speed was all but impossible in such an atmosphere—the fog was everywhere; people abroad in the town floated rather than walked; avoiding each other by the audible difficulty of their breathing alone. There was a most intense silence in the room just then. The remotest whisper would have been heard in it: for London, once disturbed, grows like the ocean in its sound and fury—and, like the sea, the city has its moments of almost faultless repose. But just as she fell back a muffled indistinct sound, as of some vehicle that passed, went by on the pavement below. Then it stopped. The lady spoken to, glided anxiously to one of the windows—nothing was visible: as she turned, however, a low, stealthy footstep was heard on the staircase within the house, the door opened softly, and a gentleman entered the room. It was her husband, Mr. Crayston Blackoder from Clifford's Inn. The mist which hung about them seemed to have grown denser than ever, as though he had brought more of it in with him. Both met silently in the centre of the

apartment. The third present was a certain Dr. Alexander Crashaw, then a physician of some celebrity ; who left the bedside quietly and joined them.

“ This is terribly sudden ! ” whispered the last comer, turning his face rapidly from one to another as he entered. “ Is there *no* hope left ? ”

The doctor glanced behind him for an instant—then shook his head.

“ She seemed better this morning than for two months past,” pursued the other earnestly, but with the same impossibility still in his voice—which seemed almost incapable of inflexion ; “ it is indeed most terribly sudden ! ”

“ Hush ! ”

And as his wife uttered this exclamation Mr. Blackoder looked round, nervously, and for the first time, to the bed in which his sister lay.

It was all in deep shadow ; for their figures intercepted the light that fell on it.

Then he started abruptly ; for he saw she was leaning forward—her eyes distinctly visible, gleaming as with some strange deathly phosphorescence and riveted on his own.

As they moved, the light fell through on her again.

Seeing this man’s form, a strange accession of strength seemed once more to have come upon the dying woman. One could hardly explain the eagerness—the wild anxiety—which convulsed her face as she caught sight of his : the pupils of her eyes, dilated and expressionless as they had seemed before, contracted now till they glittered like the points of a needle. Raising herself quite up in the bed, she stretched one of her hands out solemnly to him ; which he, stepping forward, took without a word or motion,

save that incidentally, as it were, he bent down and kissed her on the forehead. It was once, and once only; for some men are so devoid of passion they can hardly simulate it even. This sudden entry created a slight stir; now once more the same death-like silence fell upon the room. One could have heard the crickets in the basement below: even the harsh reiteration of her breathing ceased.

“It *is* sudden, Crayston. But you can’t keep me alive with a kiss now,” she whispered earnestly, after scanning his face with the same piercing expression.

She must have overheard what he had just said.

“There is no hope *now*, Crayston,” she went on. “Death is in my very voice, and ere I die I have something to tell you about my son.”

Her articulation had grown perfectly audible by this time—save for the strong keen tremor of excitement there was in it, which, like an electric thrill, appeared to permeate her whole system.

“Had we not better be left alone for an instant, Christine?” whispered the brother, looking round him and bending over her at one and the same time.

“No! stop!” exclaimed the invalid, this time all but out loud. “There must be *two* of you present—two! I am going to alter my will, Crayston, for I never dreamt I could really die when I made it—I could never die in peace till I alter, destroy it! It is the one thing I am alive for now!” She was far too excited and bent on her own words to be aware for a moment of the look which passed over her brother’s face as he heard them, with all their wild fluctuations of decision and incoherence: but she

kept his hand clasped tight in her own the whole while—as though she half feared he might escape her or refuse to listen: and her eyes were fixed on his and his on hers, as though there were the fascination of some subtle magnetism between them. “I have written another secretly,” she continued with the same restless, fitful energy. “But I dared not tell you till now. I copied the form out from one of your books, while you were away, when I really came to understand my condition: and I have written it out again this morning, before this fit came upon me. You *must* promise, and Dr. Crashaw *has* promised, to sign it as witnesses. I have explained it to him. There is no time for explanation between *us* now. Quick! Quick! or it will be too late, and I shall grow delirious again as I have been. I lie in an agony without end till you help me!”

Again the same disturbed look flickered over the brother's face; but, whatever it signified, he repressed it with an effort.

There seemed something in the wildness of his sister's speech, dying as she was, which somehow showed it would have been a difficult thing to change her resolution—even had there existed desire or opportunity on his part; for there is an irresistible energy in a woman's heart sometimes, even though death alone be the cause which wakens it. There is no arguing with death or with a person about to die.

All this while she had been thrusting her disengaged hand under the pillows her body had just rested on; and, presently, with great difficulty, she pulled out some small object which she held out mutely to the man whose name

she just had mentioned, who was now at the opposite side of the bed.

It was a small steel key which had been concealed there. He took it from her without a syllable.

Then she pointed, still with her disengaged emaciated hand, to a dark, heavily-carved *escritoire* which seemed to have been used by her, and which stood in a corner fronting the bedstead.

“There!—in the left hand drawer—the paper I told you of! Bring it to me—it must be read out loud!”

Without a word the physician proceeded to open the door she pointed to: drawing a sheet of paper out of this, he put it quietly into her reach.

She herself, seizing the paper convulsively in her disengaged hand, bent forwards to the light and began reading its contents out loud—still grasping Crayston’s wrist tightly all the while.

It was very short and stated that,

Whereas she Christine Helmore widow of the Parish of Marylebone in the county of Middlesex did by a certain Will heretofore made bequeath to her son Stephen and the heirs of his body the entirety of her personal estate solely bearing condition that he should on attaining the age of twenty-one or within five years from or after that date marry his cousin her niece Louise Blackoder now she the testatrix did hereby totally revoke make null and void the said condition and thereby did give to her son the said Stephen the whole of her personal estate aforesaid absolutely this to be made over to him unconditionally on his attaining the age of twenty-one.

And in all other respects she did thereby confirm her said Will.

As she first began to read her voice quivered over every fresh word as though about to fail her altogether: at the end it acquired a firmness well nigh incredible, seeing what her state was.

"Now it must be signed," she continued looking up: "give me a pen!"

Mr. Blackoder had not exhibited the slightest token of sensibility, while this strange proceeding took place; but as she made this last request he glanced up inadvertently from her face on which his eyes had just been fixed so intently: he saw the man opposite watching his own keenly.

Medical men have strangely penetrating physiognomies sometimes.

The wife was behind in the half-light, her face pale as with the reflection of death.

Blackoder caught sight of them dimly as in a dream.

One glance sufficed; in another moment he had taken his resolution.

"This document is perfectly legal and rightly worded," he exclaimed. "We can both of us sign with absolute equanimity, if you will, sir."

"I have already promised, Mr. Blackoder," returned the physician quietly.

Mr. Blackoder raised his head sharply and looked at him—his face seemed more impassive than his own, however.

"Only two witnesses are necessary," he continued.
"Helen, is there an inkstand here?"

At this Mrs. Blackoder hastily dipped a pen into the stand beside which it lay, on the escritoire just mentioned, and brought it to him over the bed.

She had not opened her lips once since this discussion began.

He took it slowly, examining if its nib were fit for use; then put the handle into his sister's fingers—motioning to a spot on the paper where she was to sign.

This Mrs. Helmore accomplished without apparent difficulty, for her present signature was even more legible than the rest of the writing—

"CHRISTINE HELMORE."

Now under the main portion of the document there was transcribed a second sentence which read as follows—

"Signed and declared by the said Christine Helmore testatrix as a codicil to her last Will and testament in the presence of us who at her request and in her presence and in the presence of each other all being present at the same time have hereunto subscribed our names as witnesses."

When, opposite this, his sister had written her own signature, Mr. Blackoder bent down himself—for to all appearances she refused to allow him the paper wholly in his own hands, and taking the pen from her, beneath this sentence wrote his own name in small, keen, but scarcely decipherable characters:—

"CRAYSTON BLACKODER, No.—, Clifford's Inn, London."

"Now, sir!" he continued, speaking still in a whisper—"Your signature will come under mine."

Dr. Crashaw paused for an instant, adjusting his spectacles ; then leant over and signed in the way Crayston had signed himself—

“ ALEXANDER CRASHAW, M.D., —— Square, London.”

This took place in absolute silence.

Even the creaking of the pen ceased at last, so that there was a dead and solemn stillness in the room.

Then both these men glanced at each other for a moment.

Crayston had not changed his position once, as far as his feet were concerned ; but when, in signing the document, his sister had been forced to free his hand, he staggered for an instant and put it suddenly behind him.

It seemed as if he dreaded lest she should take it again.

But as they stood there, there was an abrupt movement under them, and both glanced down simultaneously at the testatrix, who, with a deep sigh, had fallen back on the pillows again. The atmosphere of the room round them had grown very damp—damp with a dampness which neither the fire nor the lamplight seemed able to dispel ; their breath caught mystically upon it and swirled round their heads in an absolute cloud ; her breath had previously been visible too, diminishing every instant though they saw and knew it to be. But now there were no signs of it on her lips ; one little spiral whirl of mist only flickered up into the air over her face and hung quivering for an instant as they watched it. Then it was gone again. It was her life breath—her very soul, perhaps—for this time Mrs. Helmore was dead.

CHAPTER IV.

DIES NEFASTUS.

THE London fog had added one more to its innumerable list of victims. Nothing whatever could have been done—she was dead; literally suffocated. The end had proved so swift that, thrown off their guard as her friends had been by the previous amelioration alluded to by her brother, there had hardly been time to send for assistance even. When it came, all medical knowledge proved useless. Her son, a boy of thirteen, whom the document just signed concerned so intimately, was then absent at school; he had only left her and gone back two days before; the nurse who usually attended her was absent that day too, sent away to her friends by the dead woman herself—who had expressed a wish to be alone for the morning: one of the other servants was incapacitated by illness. There had only been time to bring the doctor then present, her usual medical attendant, and to despatch the note Mr. Blackoder himself received. The whole household in short had been thrown into confusion. It was strange to see the dead woman's face lying there, turned up to the light so still and motionless, while these people, when the sudden shock and surprise a little died away, stood whispering round it.

There are two sides to death: an illimitable terror blended with the subtlest pathos; it is more natural than the sobbing of a hurt child, and yet wilder than the reverberation of thunder among mountains.

“Leaves have their time to fall,
And flowers to wither at the North wind’s breath,
And stars to set;—but all,
Thou hast all seasons for thine own, O death !”

A sufferer from consumption, as Mrs. Helmore had been, is like a bird in the claws of a cat. It is cruel, subtle, and inexorable. It reassures only to betray the more profoundly. It caresses and crushes. It plays with you—disguises its whole nature—clings to you with nervous tenacity, and yet suffers you to elude it up to the end even—almost to escape: and then, suddenly and at the last, it turns and rends you to pieces !

CHAPTER V.

INTO THE FOG.

PRESENTLY Dr. Crashaw rose; the sombreness and silence which enthralled these two seemed fallen on him as well. In the presence of death, human beings grow intolerable to each other. He was lighted down stairs by Crayston himself. Two or three words passed between them at the door, having regard to the convention they had both entered into; then the physician’s carriage, still waiting for him, drew up before the house—illuminating all the vapour with its lamps, adding to it with the steam of its horses—both of which seemed strangely restive with their prolonged stay; for the sparks were struck out beneath

their hoofs, glittering on the metal of their harness, even as they stood there.

“ Good night, Mr. Blackoder. Drive on!—home.”

The next instant the window drew up and Dr. Crashaw’s voice was drowned in the rattle of the wheels beneath.

CHAPTER VI.

CE N’EST QUE LE PREMIER PAS QUI COÛTE.

THE scene in which this story virtually commences was a small west-central square, adjoining Gower Street; a locality then deemed more fashionable than at present. Despite the atmosphere, Crayston remained on his door-step an instant yet, watching the line of the carriage-lamps as they flitted away, deeper and deeper into the darkness, as though the fog were phosphorescent like the sea, and the horses were breaking its vapour into fire as they passed. Suddenly, however, and quite unexpectedly, a third light flashed into view seemingly confronting them—and flitting from side to side like a will o’ the wisp: there was a loud shout; then they swerved rapidly asunder again. The third steadied itself and recommenced its progress: but the two first, in lieu of rounding the corner as they should have done, drew swiftly back in the gloom—then shot straight on again, circling the square in a swift curve towards the house they had driven from. Standing still at the door, as he was, Crayston just caught sight of a blurred outline of the carriage which passed him with its

horses kicking and plunging desperately. Twenty paces further on they had all dashed heavily against the square-railings on the narrow strip of pavement opposite. Then, with a still wilder crash than before, the whole carriage lunged over on one side and came to a stop.

This occurred with a rapidity well nigh incredible.

The light which seemed to have first startled the horses still advanced, however; then suddenly it too came to a pause, and there was a muffled cry for assistance. Making his way breathlessly towards this, Crayston found a man who had been leading a cab, with a flaming torch in his hand, kneeling down over a senseless body which lay at their feet, in a thick pool of mud, which had been collected and left at the side of the pavement. The whole figure was covered with this. Turning the face up to the light, they found it so blackened and bloodstained as to be hardly recognizable. Between them both, and without a word, the body was dragged to the open doorway near them; though not the slightest trace of sensibility was visible about it when they got there.

While this took place a third individual jumped out of the cab and followed them.

These three men, carrying a fourth between them, entered the passage, where they laid their burthen down again.

By that time, attracted by the wild confusion and noise, Mrs. Blackoder herself had rushed down to where they all stood. Women, unless professionally trained, as they should ever be, are very rarely of use in sudden emergencies like this. It was quite dark round them; but presently a candle was lighted. Then the face was recognized—for

it was Dr. Crashaw who lay there. There was still no movement about his figure; the left arm quivered slightly, and that was all. After a hasty consultation these three men again raised the body—this time conveying it out into the fog again to where the cab still stood.

Presently Mr. Blackoder came back hurriedly.

The wife put some terrified question to him, but he pushed by her without answering and went straight upstairs.

The next moment he was in the passage again.

“I am going to the hospital!” he exclaimed briefly as he passed. Then, shutting the door behind him, he was gone.

The cab had not started when he regained it.

A second man had been found in the obscurity just behind, and had been conveyed inside, unable to stand. This was the coachman, who had attempted to leap from his box when the accident first occurred, seemingly. A large crowd had collected round them already, strange to say. No better idea of the immensity of London can be acquired than by watching the way in which one of these crowds swarms together in a street where previously no single soul seemed visible. In this fog it looked more mysterious than ever. A crowd rises in London like a cloud in the sky—it comes one knows not whence, and seems to dissolve back again into bricks and mortar. Most of the lookers-on followed the cab however: and presently, save for the police who stood over the shattered carriage while the horses were led away, and for two or three momentary loiterers, the square was emptied of movement and clamour again.

CHAPTER VII.

ANGUIS IN HERBA.

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour after, when Mr. Blackoder returned, nothing was visible there. The place seemed deserted. Letting himself in, he went slowly upstairs to a room on the first floor, where he heard voices as he thought. This was the case; for as he entered he found Mrs. Blackoder seated with a child beside her, whose neck was pressed up close under her arm—a girl of about eleven, with unbound black hair that fell in loose ringlets about her shoulders, as was usual with children then. But seeing how young she was, her face looked strangely sensitive.

As her eyes met his, he motioned slightly to the passage behind him, at which the child left her mother timidly and quitted them.

“Has she been frightened at all?” he asked.

“Who?”

“Louise.”

“A little, Crayston.”

“And you’ve both been crying, Helen?”

“Yes.”

“Ah! I think you had better try and control yourself a little, if only for her—you both look tired in the eyes.”

While speaking, Crayston had walked up firmly to his wife and placed his hand on her shoulder.

“Helen!” he suddenly began, this accident has proved

fatal. Crashaw died on his way to Charles Street, where we took him."

"And while you were gone Christine's nurse came back, and we tried to set her room a little in order."

"Yes, Helen, you did right."

"But doing this I suddenly recollected the paper signed by you, and I looked for it, Crayston. It was nowhere to be found! Did you take it away with you when you passed me?"

There seemed something strangely sweet in Mrs. Blackoder's countenance, even now, bewildered and stupefied as she appeared. But she said this in an almost unaccountably troubled tone, looking fixedly at him the whole while.

"Paper!—why, Helen, are you dreaming?" he ejaculated in return, responding to her scrutiny with an even greater firmness. "What paper?"

"You can never mean—"

Then she stopped abruptly, yet still staring at him; though this time with a look of absolute terror.

"Mean what, Helen?"

But the firm unflinching look of her husband's face seemed to have silenced and even left her incapable of speech; she answered not a word. The next moment and Crayston had taken her arm under his, and drawn her to one of the windows in the room—a deep dark recess, where the flicker of the firelight hardly fell on them.

"Helen," he recommenced.

"Crayston."

"Speak louder my dear, I can scarcely make you out."

"I have never told you, Helen," he continued rapidly,

“ what a struggle *I* began life with. Never completely, at least, for there are things in it I scarce like thinking of, even at present. Yet now at last, you must listen to me for a few minutes. Let me begin at the beginning.

“ When still a boy, my father, as you know, left the country he was born in, and came through France to London: where he obtained a clerkship in a certain great shipping firm, Helmore, Helmore, and Blackoder. And when some years later he married the daughter of his last-named master (against her father’s will, it was said, and much as I married you, to speak plainly), he then changed his Greek for her maiden English name, which I now bear. Twelve years later, Constantine Petropulaki—or Blackoder, as he chose to be called—becoming a partner himself, bought out and discarded the three original partners of his house, and was left sole master. Of his former career I know no more than this, which you know already. But one day, when Christine was nine, I fifteen, we were told our father had been found *dead* on the floor of his counting-house! My mother—no; my mother had been dead herself then some years: it was her family who—holding my father to have destroyed their share in his business unjustly—the moment he started on his own account, had formed a combination of the then Bristol and London ship-owners, which, sailing its ships against his, ended by ruining him completely. He, a passionate man, in his disappointment, died of this; leaving no assets whatever. Our relatives refused to see us even. Thrown thus from one of the highest to what I might almost term the very lowest position in existence, I for a few days remained totally

in despair. Then I determined to quit everything and come up here to London ; for in those days the metropolis was a huge blind whirlpool, which all things of no proper footing outside were sucked into.

“ Now you must be aware, probably, of your father’s habit of receiving no premiums from his clerks, and making them really work for him instead. Well, when I first became acquainted with you and John Girdlestone, a similar firm had received me on these terms—paying me nothing whatever to begin with, as a matter of course. In the evenings I sought work as a copyist, as anything in fact ; provided only I could make a few shillings on which to support our lives. After a few years of this incessant struggling, our condition changed slightly, I got a small salary from my master in brief. Christine was then almost a woman, I was close on twenty-two. And one afternoon, shortly after this, a young man, scarcely older than myself, met Christine in the street, followed her home, and two days later introduced himself to me as her suitor. He was determined to marry her at all hazards, he said. For she was considered very beautiful by him and others, I believe.

“ This man was your friend George Stephen Helmore.

“ And when he told me this name, Helen, I fairly started. For the Helmores were cousins of the Blackoders, and this man was a son of the senior partner of my father’s house, Helmore, Helmore, and Blackoder ; *our relative, and a son of the man who had helped to ruin us!*

“ Well, as you know, he married Christine, and for some time kept the union secret. Three months later his wife’s identity oozed out, and he was cast off by all his relatives ;

left, like myself, to his own resources. He had married in the face of a feud so bitter and envenomed that I began to regret having allowed this marriage. *Acerrima prox...!* the hatred of near relations is the most intense, I mean. But George Helmore was not quite in *my* position, Helen. It so happened one of his maternal uncles was an eccentric person, Antholin Hebditch by name, who had been a small colliery agent all his life, and of whom the great city Helmores had taken not the slightest notice for many years ; he was naturally a remote connection of my own. For some reason this man hated his richer relatives bitterly, and when this quarrel occurred in their family, he—old as he was—heard of it instantly, and wrote forthwith to my brother-in-law, explaining his relationship, and asking to see him. Accordingly they met. Oddly enough, George never suspected him of possessing a penny ; yet two years later the old man died, leaving him owner of a sum of over forty thousand pounds.

“One condition only he attached to the acceptance of this sum, and Helmore all but lost the property in consequence. The legatee was never to consent to any reconciliation with his father, an emergency luckily enough frustrated, ere the proving of the will, by his father’s death.

“Now comes the strangest part of the whole, Helen.

“Had George Helmore declined to comply with the conditions of this will, Antholin Hebditch had so arranged that his legacy should devolve on *me*. I who, till then, had scarcely heard of him !

“And stranger still, a previous document was discovered among his papers, bestowing the whole property on me

absolutely, and without any conditions whatever. Hebditch, in short, had heard of my family through the much talked of disagreement in my father's business, whose getting for a time the better of the Helmores he hated so himself had gratified him ; and, in some occult way, he had kept us in sight ever since. Just before his death, however, as I have shown you, a subtler means of pampering his insane spite struck him ; on which, by way of embittering the dissensions of the Helmore family, he made his second will. Antholin Hebditch, among other peculiarities, was what one calls a miser ; he died more of starvation than anything else. In drawing up his last will he had been too penurious to get legal advice even. The first was right enough—I have it still at my office : the second was a simple and egregious act of insanity—with the legislation *then* in force, the slightest contest would have proved it null and void. In law the property was *mine*. Seeing this, I said nothing, only holding the former document in readiness lest any till then unheard-of relative should put in a claim. None did. The document was legalised ; George obtained the legacy. All this took place fourteen years ago, ere you could have heard a word of it, unless through your father, who was not likely to attract your attention more to me than he could help just then : two years later, just after Helmore's own death, we were married ourselves. Now you know yourself how Christine's husband died and left his property entirely to her ; the fact of his son being born, three months after the making of the will, in no wise setting aside his will. So at last (instead of to me, its rightful owner), Antholin Hebditch's insane legacy came solely to my sister. Such is the

mockery of fate ! But shortly after, and ere the birth of our own daughter, Christine gratuitously informed me she intended to leave half her property divided among any children I might have—half to her own son ; expecting herself to die at any moment when she spoke. I confess to having remonstrated with her at the time. Yet when Louise was born, she decided afresh that, should no other children come in the way, these two should be married when of age, thus sharing equally the good fortune their parents had been driven from. It was a simple act of justice, she said ; and to this end her will was made, I agreeing to it, as you know, from the first."

" I knew not a word of it till two years later ! And she told us to-night that you had even *forced* her into making the will, Crayston," interrupted Mrs. Blackoder at this last sentence, in a tone which formed a strange contrast to her husband's.

" I never spoke one word on the subject, Helen, till she showed it me, drawn up by my then partner, your own father."

" Crayston ! "

" Not one word till then ! And from that day to this the entire capital of her money has been left to accumulate untouched, with its interest. From that day till now, Christine has lived with us, free of all expense, of all trouble, dying slowly from day to day, with all the house at her disposal. Well, at this last moment, giving not the vaguest clue to her real meaning, all but reviling us both, lying on her bed here as she was, in a condition tantamount to insanity, she affects to change perhaps the most solemn resolution she ever came to, ere her life and sanity gave

way. All Louise's just claims upon her are set aside like so many straws—we are left without even a word of thanks. Why? People in such a condition are not capable even legally of comprehending their own wishes; she confessed herself to being delirious at the time."

" Yet she said she never intended even from the first to ratify the will you wish her to have left untouched—distinctly, distinctly, Crayston!"

" It is very sad to have to talk like this at such a moment, Helen. But consumption is closely allied to insanity, and insanity invariably assumes delusions against its best friends. In such cases it becomes the relatives of one like Christine to think *for* her as much as *of* her; to be to her a second nature, in short. A sound mind in an unsound body is not possible."

" Good Heaven! what can you mean?"

" This, Helen,—that the whole question resolves itself to *one* issue. Am I to prove legally that the entire property in question was never properly my sister's to dispose of? or can we—now the second witness is silenced so shockingly—allow the matter to rest on its *first footing*? It is a very serious question, Helen, let me assure you."

" It *is*, Crayston!"

Again there was a dead unbroken silence between them.

" We are between Charybdis and Scylla," Crayston resumed; " we have a choice between three evils."

" We have, indeed!"

" Is Louise to be cheated out of her just inheritance? am I to interfere and make our own nephew a beggar? or shall Mrs. Helmore's first will remain in force as before?"

" How *can* it remain so?"

“How can anything be easier?”

At this there fell a second intense pause between them; she seemed as though she would have shrunk back from him had he not withheld her.

“Have we any love for our daughter or not, Helen?” he continued calmly. “Are we for an insane whim like this to overlook Louise’s interest as if we had no concern in it?”

“It was no mere whim, Crayston! I knew what was coming for three years past,” interrupted the wife again, with an almost threatening emphasis. “Those who saw must weep. But I have no power to argue with you; you know *that* only too well!”

“Were Stephen, when of an age to decide for himself, positively to object to this marriage we contemplate,” the husband went on, “some secondary arrangement would have to be come to, naturally. But if we possess the slightest tact, why should he? What I propose is this. We must keep this last will back till he is twenty-one; then he will, in all probability, marry his cousin without a word, and be very glad to. Thus the whole difficulty will be obviated. If on the contrary he disappoints our expectations after all, the question must be raised afresh. Were I able to give Louise an equitable dowry from my own pocket, nothing need be said more about the matter; the reasons which actuate me now would then lie in abeyance. Justice is Heaven’s first law. But for the present I am determined not to overlook Louise’s interest, even if her mother is; and if we hold our nephew’s interest at the smallest worth, an *instant* decision must be come to, Helen!”

“If you keep this paper back till then, Crayston, will you

promise me solemnly, as God is our judge—will you *promise* to maintain your word in leaving Stephen an unrestricted freedom in the matter, if he should object ? ”

“ Before God I do, Helen.”

The speaker said this in a low deliberate voice; though his wife’s, which was louder, faltered so as to be almost inarticulate.

“ And now, Helen,” he continued, “ will you for Louise’s—for your own daughter’s—sake, give me your word to be silent in the matter till I can give you leave to speak ? ”

“ Yes ! I—I—Oh Crayston ! Crayston ! If you love the child, be careful ! Even to-night I scarce know if you can have told me a word—”

“ Do you give me your promise or not, Helen ? ”

“ Yes ! ”

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH THE FOG CLEARS AWAY AGAIN.

THERE was a deep silence in the house for the rest of that night.

Death reigned visibly inside, and the fog without—both supremely : both satiated.

There had not been such a fog in London even, for years ; innumerable accidents happened through it everywhere, in the earlier part of the evening : houses were robbed, barges sunk on the river and people run over in the streets—for the sake of robbing their corpses afterwards, in some

instances, it was said. In those days the "pitch-plaster" mania was abroad, like a dark and horrid dream—a dream as it too often was *not*, in many cases. And in the public newspapers of that day one may still read how, in a street near where the Blackoders lived, a man mistook his neighbour's house and rooms for his own in the gloom, and entering them was slain by the real master in a fit of jealousy, ere any explanation could ensue. All through the night the hidden steeples from the streets around tolled out the hours solemnly as they passed in their shrouded flights, the strokes echoing and re-echoing mournfully to every quarter of the town, out into the suburbs even; until in its colossal obscurity and silence, London grew to resemble some huge slumbering animal, rousing itself an instant and falling uneasily asleep again. It was the inanition of deep exhaustion. These cities of ours are to our mental what the planetary system is to our physical existence. Paris, wavering and treacherous, stands for the moon; Rome for the earth, with all its associations and memories; Berlin for Mars, and St Petersburg for Saturn: but London is the sun round which the cities of the earth revolve. The whole progress of the world centres in London—London is as the axle of one gigantic wheel, which whirls perpetually and comprehends the universe. But for this single night its spirit failed, unequal to the strain—its splendour eclipsed itself in its squalor and in its misery. There was a phosphorescent luminousness over the whole city, serving only the more deeply to betray its gloom; every hour it seemed to mourn for some loss. And when at day-break, in the smoke-stained lurid sun-rise, the wind rose unexpectedly and swept the fog to flight again, its reluctant vapours streamed off to

windward ; coiling and clinging and writhing until they seemed endowed with sinister, unnatural vitality :—until the reappearing city, with its miles upon miles of sombre slate-tiled roofs, might almost have been likened to some monstrous Titan who had been buried alive for dead and had broken through the crust of the earth again—who, tearing himself free from his winding-sheet, still staggers dizzily with its fragments dangling to its limbs.

END OF INTRODUCTION.

HEBDITCH'S LEGACY.

CHAPTER I.

WHICH THE VULGAR-MINDED ARE EXHORTED TO AVOID.

Beauty!

Beauty, the profound irresistible harmony—beauty, at once the spirit and speech—beauty, which makes mad like nightshade, (what irrevocable sacrifices, what imperishable heart-burnings, will not its victims undergo? what heaven too high, what hell too deep, to look unmoved on it?—) Beauty, round which the air trembles with subtle magnetism—beauty, which if not poetry itself, yet rouses so wild a poetry in its beholders,—beauty, at once the inspiration and the song—beauty, the direct influence and articulation of the soul it springs from—beauty, the true psychic force, the justification of the very world it illuminates. Who shall describe it or analyze? Beauty is like the beginning of things, it is indefinable. It is like truth, the mean and the vulgar-minded quail before it. Beauty and virtue in their highest senses are one and the same—it is the one principle for which the world exists, to which the ages tend: the sun shines for it, the azure sky and the

green fields. The wind dies in the tangles of its hair, the sea moans for the splash of its limbs and their suppleness. Eyes which lighten with passion, like flames blown in the wind—lips which smile and brows which darken ! Beauty is the reanimating principle—the fountain and the river; the sombre terrible slave, the gracious master !

It is the sublime privilege of beauty that it should be self-conscious, but no really beautiful woman is ever vain or frivolous.

Only pretty women make coquettes.

Between the conventional ever-changing ideals of prettiness and the divine unchangeable reality of beauty, there lies an unfathomable abyss. They differ more than the top-most wind-blown branches of a tree from its deepest and most hidden foliage. Beauty is the dream and the reality, the flame and the radiance. "A little flower is the growth of three hundred years," exclaimed a poet who had some vague inarticulate conception of truth in his soul. It has taken a hundred million centuries to build up and mature the beauty of a woman's face. Beauty belongs to women, and to women alone—Nature has surrendered up her privilege to them.

Sacred and immutable heritage !

CHAPTER II.

IN A VERANDAH.

ONE sultry evening in the month of June 1847, a young girl stood leaning on the rail of a vine-covered verandah,

gazing through the glimmer of the dusk to where the sun had disappeared, deep down in a lurid bank of the western clouds—opposite which, still dimly visible, the slope, crowned with the towers of Old Rochester Castle, loomed up in the far distance ; a black sombre boulder, fringed with mingled mist and foliage. Round its base wound the channel of the Medway—hastening and glistening backwards ; a flash of light left behind and hurrying to overtake the sunset as it were ;—right beyond lay the marshes, green and dappled with mist. There was rain in the sky overhead, and thunder too, to judge by its oppression and gloominess ; but a last gleam, lingering from the once fiery west, still lit up her eyes as she leant there,—

“ Twin mysteries,
So deep your sense sank drowned in them, so bright
That even their colour seemed a mystery.”

And where it fell on the darkened tresses of her hair, they sparkled in so singular a fashion, one might have imagined a living flame bound up and entangled in them ; writhing perpetually to break free or expire. Then once more, the black rain-laden clouds closed over each other, and their momentary radiance was gone, save for the livid flashes of lightning which ever and anon brought them into view again. She seemed to be listening intently.

To all passionate or excitable natures, there is a keen insatiable zest of enjoyment in the twilight hour—in its faultless subtlety and in its all but faultless repose. The cold-blooded are merely depressed by it; for in its half-seen depths the imagination wanders unrestricted ; mind communes with mind in mysterious sympathy, and bodily existence fails us

thus to speak ; and for a little while, in the solemnity and silence, in the ripple and whisper that float from tree to tree replete with a vague significance—in the flutter of the wind above and the obscure murmur of the flowers below, even the great dumb spirit of that paralysed giant the earth seems to call back its powers of speech again. There was an immovable look of determination in this girl's features despite their beauty. Her eyes, dark and luminous at the same time, looked out from under their subtly curved brows with a weird flash and glitter: her face and neck and lips were wonderfully deep in colour, and perfect in form.

A beautiful woman, even though not a poetess herself, inspires a profound imperishable poetry in all around her.

Beauty, indeed, is as the soul itself made visible.

But it was not long ere she recoiled from where she was leaning, and commenced pacing restlessly from side to side of the space in which she stood. It might be that the electric state of the atmosphere was acting on her nerves. The defiant flash had gone out of her eyes now, in the sudden agitation that had mastered her; indeed, she could not have lost her sense of self-control more thoroughly, as it seemed. Then she caught herself up abruptly and stopped—pressing her hands on her brows and turning back to the trellis-work, as though she were giddy and seeking support. There, still holding and hiding her temples, she suddenly bent low down and burst into tears: not violently or angrily, but in perfect silence, and as if it gave her some quiet, intense relief.

Ere she moved again the light had all but faded from the sky.

At last some slight stir at her back forced her to look up,

and this time it was not the movement of the foliage—for a second figure had entered the verandah—a woman carrying a lighted candle in her hand, who (making not the slightest motion till the fall of her dress thus betrayed her presence) seemed to have been watching this other one through the window, almost from the first moment in which we have seen her. But at this both started and confronted each other; while the light between them, blown by the wind, flickered wildly over their faces. There could not have been much difference in their ages—they resembled each other in a slight degree; yet there was also a complete and utter contrast. This last one's hair was of a deep and fiery brown, tinted almost like blood in places where the light flashed strongly on it; her eyes—deep set and restless though they really were—seemed so lustreless now that they looked like two half-extinguished embers that only required being blown on to light up into flame again. There was a hardly natural look of carelessness or neglect about her whole person. Her hair (the texture of which was all corrugated and shrivelled, as if once exposed to some intense heat) strange in colour as it was, seemed left quite loose, and only to cling up about her head, as at present, by some effort of its own.

For an instant still they both paused facing each other thus; while their shadows, palpitating in the light, were blown up and down and about them as if by the wind itself.

But the one taken by surprise in this way turned deadly pale.

CHAPTER III.

A RESOLUTION.

“AGNES, why are you waiting there like that ?” exclaimed the second comer at last, in a dry expressionless voice.

The one addressed as Agnes made no reply whatever, but seemed to look back at her questioner with an expression in which aversion struggled with some even stronger feeling—something well-nigh akin to terror.

The other evidently marked this.

“Is he treating *you* (as I hope he intends to) pray—as nobly as he dealt with *me* ?”

There was a tinge of irony in her manner now.

But still there was no reply.

“Are you always to keep this silent sullen look about you, may I ask ? Not *one* word to protect you with ? Well, it’s no use weeping ; we must all pay toll to the pains and penalties of being born—since it must needs be so ; but to be excuseless once born, is to be turned out of doors on a winter’s night without one’s cloak about one, Agnes. Once and for all I have come to a conclusion on this subject between us,” she continued, with a sudden movement of her hands. “Once and for all—once and for all.”

“What is it, Lizzie ?” asked Agnes, drawing nearer as this was said, but still with the same uncontrollable look of fear and pain in her face.

“Listen then and I’ll tell you. When this person first came here, without my father’s knowledge as it was—(would he had sooner been in his grave than with us, Agnes !)—he

had been for days, for weeks, even for months past, affianced to *me*—to *me*; and by all the ties and promises, the words or tokens, that one human being can hold sacred to another."

"Oh Lizzie! Lizzie!" interrupted the other, holding out her arms with an unconscious gesture as of entreaty.

"Pardon me a moment, Agnes—we neither of us can plead our ignorance of his meaning. I have received letters from him and read them over and over again, till I saw their contents floating before me in lines of fire: endless! endless!—as I see them now even. There—look! Up in the sky—against the trees!—the very grass blackens and shrivels under them as I walk; wherever I turn my eyes to escape them, they spring up and front me again."

And as she spoke, she began motioning about her wildly in the gloom. The other shrank back from the reach of her outstretched hands, evidently shuddering. "If it were so," she answered, "you would have them to show me, now."

"Ah, Agnes! you'd never dare to ask me, did you not know too well why I have *not* shown them to you," recommenced the other, growing a little calmer again, yet still with the same hysterical movements of her body.

"What do you mean, Lizzie?"

"I mean that you yourself have stolen and destroyed the packets I kept them in, Agnes."

"Oh Lizzie! Lizzie! Have some little pity on yourself if not on me! You will go mad if you talk like this."

"Hush—what's that down there?"

"Where?—where?"

"There, among the trees? Never mind—they're calling; we'll go presently, Agnes. But the moment his eyes fell on you they had lost sight of my very existence. I knew it from the first! And I? I was left to die—to shrivel like a fallen leaf—to choose any fate I cared for in life or death, provided only I troubled him no longer. Scorn is bitter to bear—and I have borne it enough now. Somebody is laughing at me among the trees there—listen!"

"No!—it's no one: no one Lizzie, only the thunder among the clouds. Come in from the verandah, dear!"

"No!"

"Why not, Lizzie?—come! come!"

"No, Agnes. There would be no good in it—the things that go about at this hour can only see in the darkness; this candle makes me invisible to them. Never mind! So day after day I stood over you, and saw him poisoning your soul as he had poisoned mine; stood by and held my peace guiltily, till at last I spoke and told you the whole story: and you in return told me I was insane—had lost my senses—was a monomaniac! I saw it then in your eyes, as I see it now, even though I call God himself to witness the truth of my statement against you both."

Saying this, she lifted her hand up solemnly to the sky, and stood for a moment with her whole arm raised.

But there was no token of favour or sensibility in the great dark void of the heavens above. Not even a star was visible yet; only the clouds drifted threateningly down the wind which fluttered the vine leaves round the heads of these two, in the verandah of the house below. The mist which, sombre and ominous, merely seemed to fringe the horizon at first, had now risen over the whole sky; it seemed

as though the lid of some immense cauldron had been suddenly taken off, below where the sun had sunk.

“Once and for all,” she recommenced in the same low but impassioned voice—though with an emphasis that had gathered gradually till it now seemed to culminate,—“I have come to a conclusion on this subject. Agnes—”

“Yes, Lizzie?”

“We must neither of us ever see this person again! I have decided this and will keep to my decision.”

To this Agnes made no reply, in word or motion; but her strange deep eyes were fixed always as in fascination on the other’s face, which seemed unwilling to meet them; for its own shifted about and faltered as though the system of her nerves were failing her.

Indeed, she had never once looked Agnes firmly back in the face since they had been together, although at intervals her lustreless apathetic eyeballs changed and glittered keenly.

“He must never come here again, Agnes. Never! The gate must be locked and the key thrown into the river. I warn you of this solemnly and in time; for if ever you speak one word to him in future or mention his name above your breath again, your uncle learns our whole story from end to end. You know what this means! Come what may, I’ll not flinch one inch from this determination:—one word or look or letter passes between you again, and *then* you may defend yourself if you can.”

This said, her voice paused, and there was a deep silence between them.

There was something almost terrifying in the way she uttered these last words. Yet, determined as her voice

was—for it literally seemed to vibrate and quiver with the passion they sprang from—it was nevertheless so suppressed that it raised not an echo in all the profound of the twilight; one could almost have heard the rippling of the river, she had just mentioned, through it, save when every now and then the thunder was heard again.

“I am going to my room now,” she suddenly exclaimed; “be good enough not to disturb me.”

But as she left the verandah, still with the candle in her hold, the other stepped forwards abruptly—following her; so that they both went back into the house together.

Presently a light flashed through the panes of a small window above, outlining the ivy on its sills, and every now and then broken by a couple of shadows: after which it was extinguished again. As this took place a sudden burst of laughter resounded—shrill and mocking and hysterical as it were,—a sound such as might have made the blood run cold. Then this ceased too. Up till then the verandah beneath remained deserted. In the silence which followed, however, its first occupant came back suddenly; treading stealthily and on tip-toe, until she had resumed her old position on the railing, where she placed herself—once more looking out mutely into the night. And in the darkness it seemed as though she were clasping her hands together or wringing them.

The quiet of the night grew more intense.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CONFESSORAL UNMASKED ; WITH CERTAIN EVENTS
NARRATED AS OCCURRING IN A GARDEN.

"It's not six months since, even now—the day after you left in fact,—I was walking down there beyond the bridge, when a couple of ladies passed me suddenly ; five steps further I heard a scream, and saw one of them had slipped down the bank, struggling over and over in the water. Before I could reach her the second had fallen in too, trying to get her back. Whether or not there was any real danger, I can't say—the current was powerful anyhow, and ere I got them to the side again it seemed to me we were all on the point of dying a watery death together. What with the wind and the water it was perfectly cold—there was nothing for it but to make straight for home, however, and on the way I went with them, naturally. We met not a soul : three more deplorable figures never were seen as we trailed along the road ; but presently as we got nearer, my two friends began whispering and looking at me uneasily—showing, in fact, they wanted me to be off again plainly. I was rather taken aback at this, you may think—but no ; my evil genius stepped in as it ever did, and I determined to take no hint from them whatsoever. So when we got to where they lived, instead of going in at the front door as I expected, they stole round the garden-wall to the back of the house, till they came to a small gate there was in it, half-covered up in a growth of ivy, the tendrils of which had been recently cut, I noticed. This they opened. There

was an air of mystery about their whole proceedings in short; and it made a deeper impression on me than you could fancy. Then the eldest of the two, as I judged her—a tall restless-looking creature with strange dark-circled eyes and reddish hair—turned back and plainly gave me my *congé*;—first she muttered something about not wishing to alarm their relatives, then her teeth chattered so she could say no more. The second seemed to have lost her voice altogether; just as she was about to open her lips, the first pulled her inside and shut the door flat in my face. As to me, my heart began to beat, cold as I was; and I thought I heard their teeth knocking against each other till they got inside the house. And there I stopped for a moment, staring at the blank wall; an additional damper so to speak."

"And that was how you saw her first?"

"Yes. But next day I was still off guard, and somehow I managed to stroll back again. It seemed mere curiosity. I found the house easily enough—a dreary dilapidated place it looked, too! The trouble was to find who lived in it. I asked for half a mile round—till every man, woman, or child I came across must have taken me for a sheriff's officer;—till the very cows looked after me suspiciously. But one can't be an unconscious bailiff or serve writs on people ere one knows one's own intentions, I take it; and at last I found what I was in search of. First, that a certain Mr. Cullingworth lived there, and secondly, two young ladies, his daughter and niece; who were all three of them very eccentric, it was added. This was enough. It was getting dark by then. I went back for a last look at the house nevertheless, and while I was staring at the

windows—most of them blocked up, by the way, to avoid the tax—I heard some one singing inside. It was an old French song I recollect my mother teaching me once—

“ Loin de vous mon cœur soupire,
Près de vous suis interdit,
Voila tout que j'ose dire,
Et peut-être j'ai trop dit.”.

It raised strange feelings in me, coming so suddenly, this quaint tender old song! I knew the voice only too well; and then for the first time it flashed upon me irresistibly how I had come to regard the girl that owned it. I was utterly taken by surprise—the whole gulf opened suddenly before me as though a mist had rolled away, and I rushed back to St. Mary's like—like a criminal. I was simply stupefied when I saw the course I had started on, but it was no use—not a week after I was there again, and that time the fates had it I should meet Miss Cullingworth, the daughter, face to face, standing at a stile watching a herd of cattle, in the field I had just passed through. It was not possible to avoid each other; when a stranger has risked his life for yours, you can't exactly treat him as one the next time you meet, and when I spoke she told me she had stood there half an hour, afraid to pass. I walked back with her then, to the old garden-gate. She was greatly excited; the cows seemed to have upset her, and I could hardly make her out. Well, this ended by her asking me into the garden with her, and there among the evergreens at the bottom we found her cousin—and I—I lost my head in an instant and stayed talking there till it grew dark.”

“What of the rest of the household while this went on?”

“I’ll tell you presently. It was a wild-looking place inside ; there was a fountain out of use for years, crumbling into dust on the lawn ; there were statues smashed down and lying at the foot of their pedestals, off which these two had broken the limbs and noses in their childhoods, they told me, for want of better employment ; there was a summer-house with the roof caved in ;—the whole garden seemed to have gone mad in brief and shaken itself to pieces. I never saw such a place ! And these two girls told me they had passed the major part of their lives in this garden—never allowed beyond its walls until quite recently.”

“That looks strange !”

“It did to me, too. But when I got to know them better I found how this was. Mr. Cullingworth, the father and uncle, was once a man of great wealth. In some way he ruined himself, on which he shut himself and his family up in this house—his wife, his daughter, his niece, and an old servant who refused to quit them—and turned misanthrope. The only person allowed outside was himself, lest the neighbours should discover how miserably dressed they were—while no one whatever was permitted inside to see how they lived ; and in this way they went on till three years back, when the wife died of a broken heart. One of them said the father connected the first of his troubles with the day of his marriage, and always declaring his wife brought him ill-luck and so caused his ruin, he refused to stir hand or foot while she remained alive to do it again, as he appears to have asserted. He seems to

have been driven morbid—half mad in fact. But when once his wife *was* dead he resumed his old business immediately, somewhere in the city, and in his periodical absences these two girls took measures to secure a little liberty again. Very naturally I think ! His chief peculiarity now is an inordinate sense of religion ; when at home he reads prayers night and morning, and on Sundays they go three times to some Calvinistic chapel in the neighbourhood. Beyond that their time is their own, for he never appears to have dreamt they could ever be in want of amusement or distraction of any sort."

"But, in Heaven's name, while you were learning all this about him, where was he ?"

"Away, in town. He knew nothing of me from the very beginning."

"A nice story, truly !"

"He was a perfect mystery to me always. But the next time I went there it was because they both expected me ; and the end of this is, as I tell you, that Agnes Desborough, which is the name of the youngest of these girls, has fallen as much in love with me as I with her,—I having done the best I could to make her do this."

"And what next ?"

"I hardly know myself ! Up till quite recently I never saw her alone once ; *that* I can say."

"And all this while they have never known who you are even ?"

"Never !"

"In point of prudence you all seem on a par with one another."

"I told them my name, certainly ; and that I belonged to a regiment down here."

“ Which greatly enlightened them, no doubt.”

“ And, moreover, I told them an insuperable reason made it necessary to keep my knowledge of them in the background for the present, which they were as anxious about as I could have been. Agnes has asked me no further questions, nor I her.”

“ And you’ve never seen this girl once alone ? ”

“ Up till *recently*, I said. But the worst of the story has still to come, unhappily for me.”

“ Well ? ”

“ This has gone on, as I told you, for over half a year. But within the last month an extraordinary change came over her cousin Miss Cullingworth ; who took to staring at me as though I were a thief, refused to speak when she was with us, and, in fine, seemed to have taken a positive hatred to us both. It was all the stranger seeing how she first encouraged me : I should never have got inside at all, but for her, in all likelihood. This all occurred in a single afternoon. The next time I got away, Agnes was alone. Do you follow me ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Elizabeth had a headache, she said. But the next time I saw her, and the last time, she was *still* alone. It struck me as very strange from the first, there was evidently something going on. She looked wretchedly ill ; but, as she said not a word on the subject, I felt some hesitation in asking her. Just then, as you know, my own cousin fell ill in London, and I was sent for post haste. Much good I could do her ! ”

“ How do you mean ? ”

“ Why, because we dread the sight of each other’s face.

Anybody would think you were in love with her yourself. All communication with Oldrington House, meanwhile, was cut off; the moment I got back, however, I was to find a letter hidden for me outside the gate, which letter she was to change every morning till she found it gone. Yesterday evening I went, and there I found the letter, sure enough; though, in some occult way, it struck me as having been already opened and sealed up again. This, perhaps, was a mere notion of mine; its contents are what alarm me most. I am to go to-night at nine, she writes, 'not till after dark.' This I can't make head or tail of. I was never there at night before. 'It is absolutely necessary I should not be seen, *for something has happened to her cousin*,' the letter proceeds, with this last sentence underlined, and she dares not keep it from me any longer. The gate will be open, she in the balcony or verandah, where I can signal to her. What do you think of all this?"

"That there's a storm brewing somewhere to all appearance, at last."

"There is! And it can't go on brewing much longer—it must burst. The last time I saw my uncle he told me he had made up his mind I must be married at Christmas! You are the only man in whom I ever really confided, Stanwise."

"What then?"

"Now, if things come, as they soon *must*, to an open rupture with him, do you think I could have acted otherwise than I have?"

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH THE CONVERSATION LAGS.

"To speak plainly, Helmore," answered the man thus appealed to, after a pause, slowly and in a grave voice, "you've got yourself into a damned unpleasant position, seeing how young you are ; and, moreover, your confidence may compromise *me* in much the same fashion."

This said, there was for some few moments a complete silence between them.

The last speaker was taller than his companion by half a head at least—older as well to all semblance, though not much above forty at the utmost, perhaps. He scarcely looked this, however, though his face was all scored with minute wrinkles, and was deeply sunburnt too. His features were not by any means unhandsome, yet they possessed neither the beauty of youth nor the dignity of age ; hovering on two extremes, they had the look of twilight about them as it were : a sort of sombre, brooding expression. Mysteriously acquired, almost impossible to analyse or account for, it was one of those expressions that lead you to expect sardonic utterances, and kindly actions afterwards. The droop of an already grey moustache very probably helped to exaggerate this appearance of melancholy. Above all other things, he looked a consummate gentleman—one of those natures in which the magnetism of sincerity is more natural than sleep to a tired eyelid, or light to fire ; whose very presence compels others into something like sincerity for a time, as well.

He was smoking at the moment he spoke, nor did he withdraw the cheroot from between his lips.

Most men who think much smoke; for in smoking the lips are closed and the nostrils opened instead, and thus the brain is nourished with a freer supply of the air requisite to its evolutions.

Mentally and physically the other was altogether of a separate build; his dark curling hair, cut short at the edges of his cap, his brown skin and his restless eyes, all served to indicate a liability to the impulses of an enthusiasm well-nigh past self-control. A perpetual flicker of nervous excitement pervaded his whole figure; some of his words had been so violently uttered that his older and quieter listener could scarce have caught their meaning.

In short his entire system, bodily and mental, seemed strung to its tensest pitch; his lips and hands literally quivered now that he tried to be silent again.

CHAPTER VI.

COR UNUM VIA UNA.

“ You intend then to keep your appointment to-night? ” recommenced the taller of the two, glancing over his cigar.

“ Yes.”

“ Well, don’t be impatient, young fellow. When a friend asks your opinion, in nine cases out of ten he merely wants you to bolster up his own. If he fails when you have approved him, he holds you morally answerable for his loss,

and if you happen to have warned him instead, he likes you all the less for discomforting him beforehand ; this, not to mention the chances of offending his dignity by directing him properly from the first. What can I say now ? ”

“ That’s what I want to know, Stanwise.”

“ If, as I strongly desire, I advise you to back out of this affair at once and for ever, I may be doing Miss Desborough, as you call her, more harm than I can guess. It would be your own fault, certainly. If I advocate the other course, I wrong your cousin equally.”

“ You needn’t fear *that* ! ”

“ How have you engaged yourself to her then ? ”

“ I was never anything else.”

“ Were you never in love with each other ? ”

“ No ! I don’t understand how, but it was simply an understood thing in the family we should be married, and up till now I have never dreamt of anything else.”

“ Excuse my staring a little ! People call you very rich, and you seem so, too. Where does your money come from ? ”

“ I don’t know.”

“ Don’t know ? ”

“ Not a bit of it. All I am aware of is that I depend entirely on my uncle for the present, and on this marriage with his daughter for the future. He has told me I shall be rich once married and, until then, makes me whatever allowance he chooses.”

“ Then all your hopes rest on him.”

“ I never saw anything else they could rest on.”

“ Good God ! I thought you had money of your own.

And all this while your uncle has simply brought you up to marry his daughter and become his heir?"

"For nothing else."

"I can hardly make it out!"

"It is so, though."

"Have you realised then—do you really know, what such a marriage, as this you seem to contemplate, may bring you to? For God's sake, be careful! More people than you, have been desperately in love ere now, and have come to repent it bitterly, and when they least expected—"

"Yes, I realise my whole future," interrupted the other. "If Miss Desborough will marry me, nothing shall prevent it."

"Wouldn't you require her uncle's consent?"

"Not necessarily. She was born almost on the same day with myself, and in three weeks will be of age."

"And, once married, what is there before you?"

"The future—nothing else that I know of, unless my uncle consents to this. But I've stood on the brink so long that a plunge will be grateful to me, if it merely breaks the intolerable monotony a little. The future *is* the future after all, Stanwise."

"It's a devilish poor look-out for all that! The past *is* past, come what may, provided always you've done nothing wrong in it at least; but all the enigmas we ever contemplated, all the evil chances that can fall on a man, lurk for him in this future of yours. Any one can muster up a little stoicism to look back on the past with—but to meet the future you must be armed *cap-à-pie* like a warrior for combat, Helmore."

"Well?"

"Well! What are you to meet it with?"

"If you mean what I'm to live on—why, I tell you, I simply don't know."

"Ah—nor I either."

"If I marry like this, and my uncle cuts off his allowance, excepting what I've saved up within the past two months, I have nothing left save the shoes I stand in. At least, nothing—"

"Save your pay as an ensign in a certain marching regiment now stationed at St. Mary's, Chatham, I take it you mean? You must be mad! I don't wish to be too hard on you, but I really don't know what to say. You've gone too far to recede in either direction, it seems to me. Is it past *all* possibility to come to some amicable understanding with your uncle?"

"I can't say one way or the other. He can't see us starve, anyhow; for that he *is* attached to me he has often shown."

At this there was again a sudden pause between them.

Thus immersed in their conversation, the shadows of these two had grown longer and longer across the thick, rank grass of the marshland they were traversing. The lowing of the cattle scattered round them, and the quick wild cries of the birds, had long dropped into silence: the twilight had grown deeper and deeper, and now at last the night had almost come down upon them—broken with constant flashes of lightning in the clouds.

"It was just here I met her first!" ejaculated the younger man, looking up suddenly.

They were close on the margin of the Medway as he spoke.

Every now and then, disturbed in its first rest, some marsh-haunting bird dashed up wildly into the night from the damp obscure ground through which they passed. The bright, quick current of the river could be heard, rippling and splashing coldly among the sedges of its banks, right on ahead of them.

"It lies down—down there some quarter of a mile off," he continued, directing the other's attention to a clump of distant trees, that stood out gloomily on the sky; for behind them the moon was evidently rising.

"What lies?"

"*The* house I mean. There, where the nightingale seems singing. You can see the roof by day from here. I brought you purposely this way; for, as I once intended to speak, I wished nothing to seem concealed from you. Would you hadn't been away so long, that I might have spoken sooner! We must separate here. Say nothing of what I've told you—it may be I should have kept my own counsel; but—but I've been almost desperate for the last fortnight! and this can't go on for ever."

"Very likely not. And as to what you say of my keeping this secret, you needn't fear me, seeing, you know very well, I've exchanged from the regiment, and am sailing for India next Saturday morning."

"So soon!"

"Yes."

"You didn't say this before!"

"I haven't been quite so communicative as you, certainly. Must we separate here, then?"

"Yes, Stanwise. There's no time left for me. I thought you'd be with us for a month yet."

“ Friday evening I leave here. But, ere we part now, I wish you to make me a promise.”

“ What is it ? ”

“ Will you, or will you not ? ”

“ If I can, I will.”

“ Well then Helmore. Keep your appointment to-night, since you must ; but, if you see your friend—tell her the whole story of your present engagement as it stands, slurring over not a single incident. You can never regret this—many dishonest actions have brought credit to their contrivers, and lasted long enough to overwhelm them in the end : yet no man ever lived long enough to repent his honesty, whatever it first brought him to. And, this done, give me your word never to be alone with her again, or alone with her and her cousin, until such time as you are legitimately engaged to one of them, if ever you are. It may be you’ll find the cousin there to-night : though, from what you tell me, I see plainly she wishes to escape her share in these proceedings of yours, and yet dares not stop them as she could and should. Women are always like this—it’s easy enough to open the flood-gates, if somebody else will only shut them. But a more honest arrangement must be come to if you desire any honest ending to such an affair. Do you agree with me ? ”

“ What can you mean ? ”

“ What I say.”

“ How can I ? ”

“ Because your incapability may prove a stigma and a disgrace to you ere long if you can’t. You’ve been a fool up till now ; you may turn something worse.”

He had not taken his cigar from his mouth once as he

spoke, which accounted for the modulation of his voice perhaps: it had burnt very low down, however, and at intervals puffed up into a bright, fiery glow—casting a vague sinister-looking shadow behind him as he walked; illuminating his moustache and eyebrows.

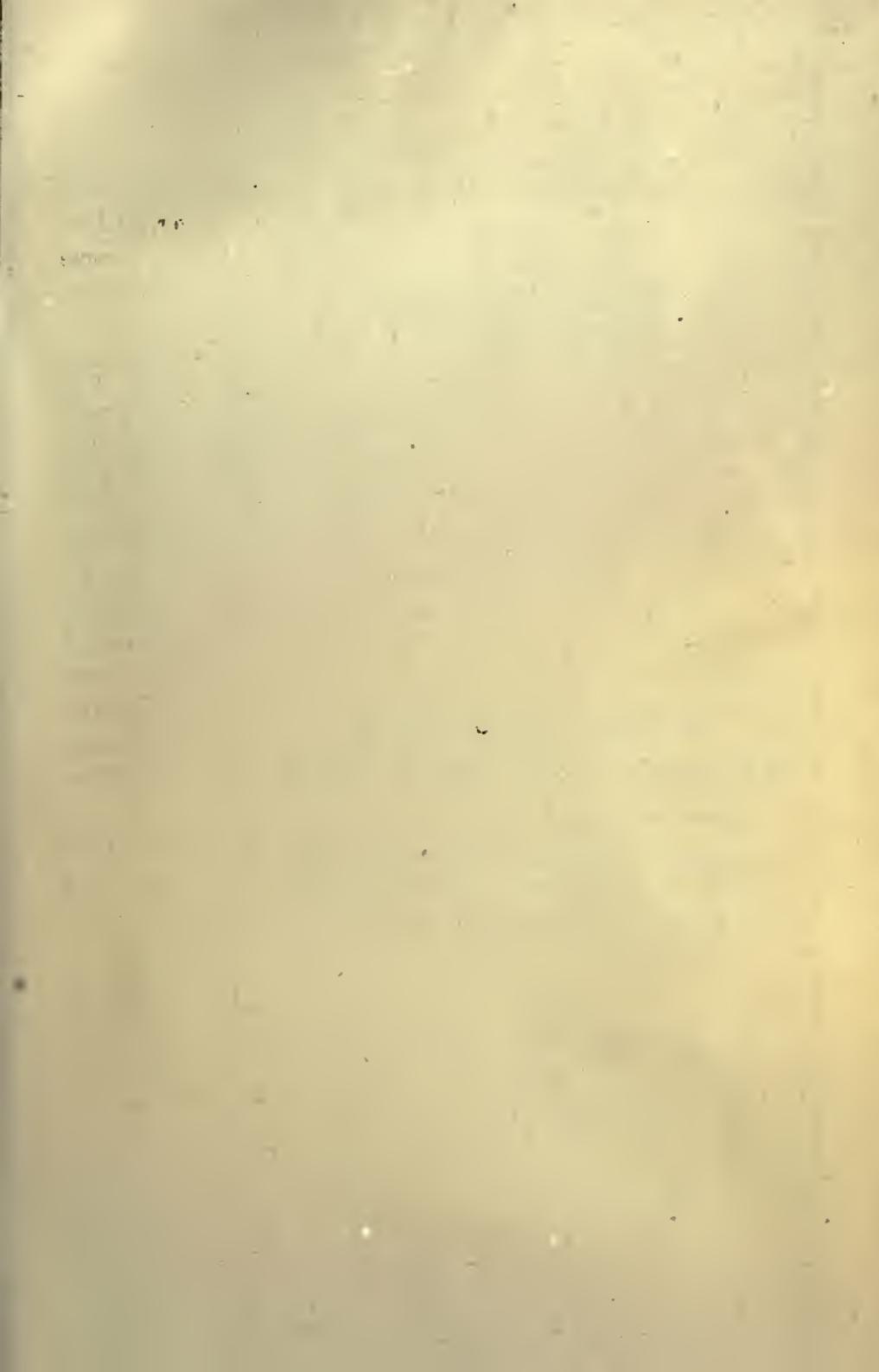
Helmore noticed a strange look of eagerness in the eyes that turned towards his own as his friend said this.

“Perhaps you know better than I, Major, though you seem to have grown very moral all of a sudden, considering the way we usually talk on—on these things,” he rejoined abruptly. “Well then, I—I promise you. And are you really leaving us on Saturday?”

“Of course. What’s the good of me here? But when you get back to-night, Helmore, come straight up to me. I shall be waiting for you, and may have something to say further still on this matter. I wish to see you particularly, for I, if you only knew my meaning, am the last person in the world to give you disinterested advice in it. God bless you, young fellow!”

And so, in the full-gathered obscurity, the major and the ensign parted: while a peal of thunder, prolonged and muttering, broke out, following one of the flashes in the distance.

END OF VOL. I.



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